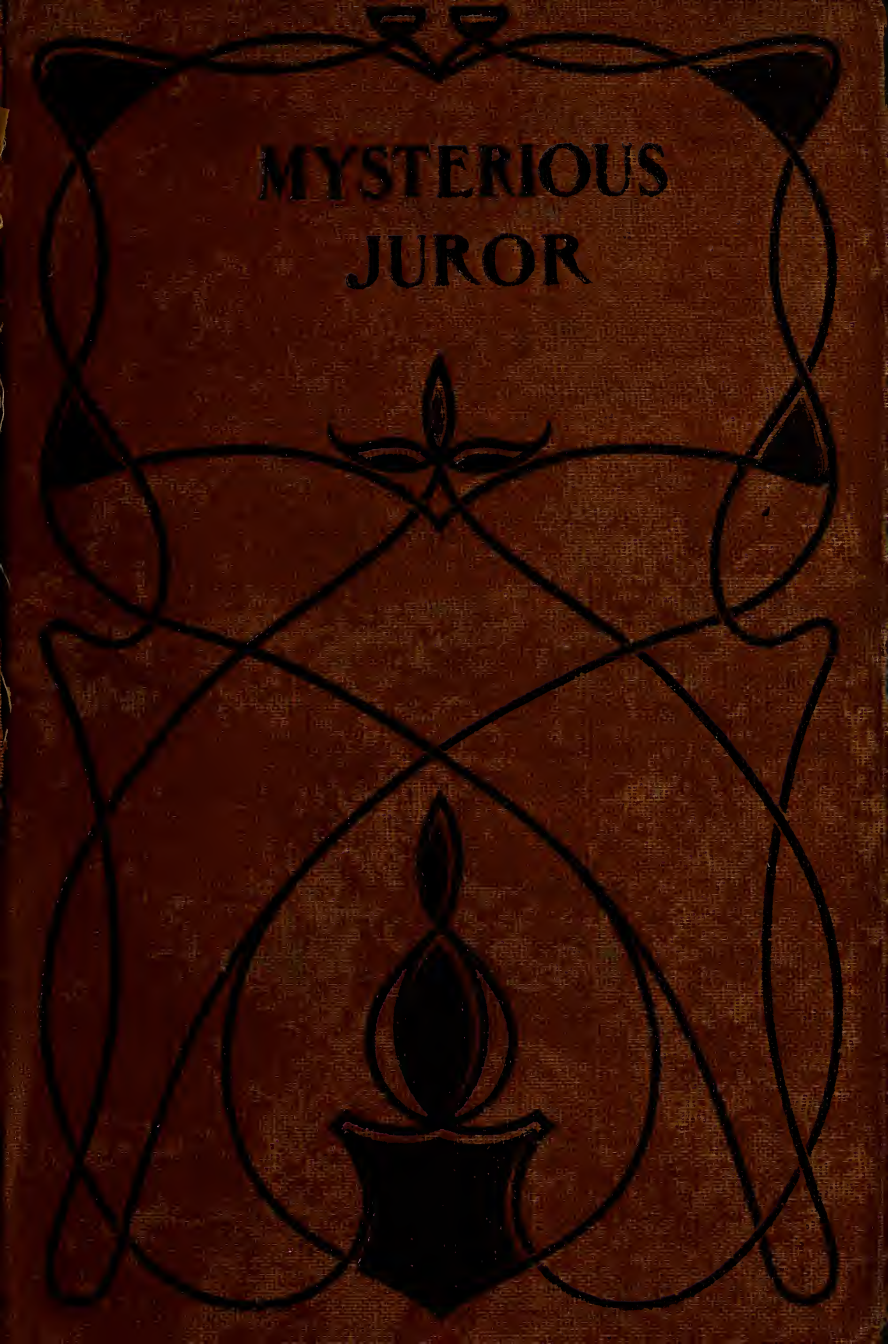
MYSTERIOUS JUROR



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THE MYSTERIOUS JUROR

—BY—

FORTUNE DU BOISGOBEY.

TRANSLATED FROM THE THIRD EDITION.

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CHAPTER I.

It is growing late and the long court-room is partially obscured by shadows; the waning light still illumines the platform where the court is sitting; but the seats of the jurors, the bench of the accused, and the crowd of spectators are already plunged in the semi-obscurity of the twilight of a gloomy autumn day.

"The case is closed," the grave voice of the president has said. The magistrates and the jurors have retired. Nothing now remains but to hear the verdict, yet the audience has not stirred.

It is made up of those amateurs of strong emotions who would pass the whole night upon their feet rather than fail to be present at the denouement of the drama. They must witness the anguish of the accused at the moment when

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he is brought back into the court room, and when his eyes question the face of his counsel to learn his fate before his sentence is pronounced.

There has not been a more exciting case tried in Paris for many years.

First, the accused is a woman, and a woman of rank. The crime imputed to her is an odious one, but it has not been clearly proved; she denies it, and has defended herself with a skill which has elicited the admiration of veterans at the bar.

The room is crowded with political, literary and fashionable celebrities. Among the privileged ones who occupy reserved seats are two gentlemen who are exchanging, in a low voice, their opinions on the discussion which has just ended and to which they have listened with the most exemplary attention.

"My friend," said the younger, "I would bet that this remarkable Baroness will be acquitted off-hand."

"Not I," murmured the other, who appeared older and more serious.

"You take the bet then? I give Mme. de Noyal one hundred louis against fifty."

"Do not speak so loud. It is not decent to bet on a woman's life."

"Bah! No one can hear us. Do you take the bet or not?"

"Well, let it be so. I will take it."

"Good! you can get ready to write a check for a thousand francs this evening."

"We shall see! and while waiting I should like to know upon what grounds you base your certainty of an acquittal."

"Upon very simple reasoning. When one person kills another, he has a motive for the murder. Now I defy you and I defy all the attorney-generals in France to say why the Baroness Angelique de Noyal should have sent a bullet into the heart of her cousin, Mlle. Jeanne Caristie. It was not for her money,

surely, for the young girl had none, while the Baroness has had an income of eighty thousand francs since she has been the widow of that great booby, de Noyal."

"Do you believe then that one commits murder for money only?"

"No; sometimes from hate and sometimes for revenge. But what reason could Mme. de Noyal have to hate an orphan girl whom she had taken into her house and overwhelmed with kindness? Will you tell me that Mme. de Noyal, who is one of the most beautiful and elegant women in Paris, was jealous of a little girl from the provinces whom no one has ever courted—unless it be you?"

"I have nothing to do with the case, and I beg you not to bring me into it."

"Ah! Ah! what a tone you take! Excuse me, Monsieur Robert du Plessis. If I had thought that——"

"My poor Raoul, you must try to cure your mania for joking on all subjects. The tragic

death of this young woman has deeply affected me. You know this, and yet you talk as if you had forgotten it."

"I was wrong, I acknowledge it. Let us go back to this dear Baroness who has been pursued with incomprehensible animosity. These lawyers of the new school attack her because she is noble, rich and in good society, but they will have their trouble for their pains. The charge falls to the ground."

"I am not of your opinion. Shall I run over the facts? Mme. de Noyal was passing the summer at her country house with Mlle. Caristie. One evening at the beginning of September she went for a walk in the park, taking her cousin with her, a thing she had never before done. An hour after she returned, wild with excitement, and told her servants that some one had shot at her and wounded Jeanne, and that instead of remaining to aid her cousin, she had made her escape."

"We do not expect a woman to be very

brave, and to have remained, at the risk of being killed, would have been heroism."

"Agreed, but it is not so easy to tell how Mlle. Caristie was killed by a bullet fired by some person so near that the powder burned her corsage."

"You have heard the answers which the prisoner gave to the questions of the president. She said that the shot was fired from a hedge which borders the path where they were walking, side by side, and that her cousin, who was on her left, almost touched the hedge. Besides it has been proved that the Baroness was extremely afraid of pistols, and that she had never owned or even handled one in her whole life. And the revolver was not found. Her counsel argued from this fact that it was not she who fired it, and I believe that he is right, although the prosecution affirms the contrary; but there has been no proof that she is not the accomplice of the assassin who has disappeared without leaving any trace. How could he have

got into the park and how could he have got out, if she had not opened the gate for him ?"

"My dear fellow, you were born for an attorney-general; you plead as if you were a lawyer. It is very fortunate that you were not on the prosecution for they have not convinced the jury. He who wishes to prove too much, proves nothing. The prosecuting attorney was too violent and overshot the mark."

"Perhaps that is so; but there is no half-way, either this woman is a monster or she is a saint."

"I prefer to believe that she is a saint, and I repeat that there is no crime without a cause. This story of rivalry between the cousins is a ridiculous invention of the prosecution who are very much put to it for an argument. Where is this Don Juan whom both these women adored ? No one has been able to say who he is. Perhaps it is you," said Raoul, who seemed to have constituted himself the official advocate of the accused.

"There it is again!" said du Plessis angrily. "I have already asked you not to mix me up with the affair."

"Oh! do not be angry; you had nothing to do with it, I know that—and the proof of it is that you were not called as a witness. But really, you used to visit at Mme. de Noyal's; you have often seen Mlle. Caristie and ought to know better than I, who hardly knew them at all, whether there was any one addressing them."

"Mme. de Noyal did not lack admirers. A great many fine gentlemen would gladly have consoled the widow who is worth two or three millions, but these same fine gentlemen would not have married an orphan without dower, simply for her beautiful eyes. Perhaps I might have done so foolish a thing. I liked Mlle. Caristie very much, and I think I might have become seriously in love with her; but I had not reached that point when this terrible event happened."

"Acknowledge then that there is no sense in the supposition of the attorney-general."

"Pardon me! Mme. de Noyal was not jealous of me, but perhaps she was of some one else."

"You would have perceived it, and you have just told me that you never saw anything of the kind."

"No—not among those with whom I generally saw her. But she went into society a great deal and I did not visit at all the houses where she went with her young cousin."

"True! But other people would have known the men with whom she was pleased, and no one has said that she showed a preference for any one. Maybe you will tell me that she kept it a secret."

"Ah! you have tired me out at last! I will not answer you at all. One thing is certain—Mlle. Caristie was murdered, and——"

"Unless she committed suicide."

"Come! you reason with your mind already made up. I give up trying to convince you, and it will be useless to discuss the matter any longer, for I hear the bell which announces the renewal of the session. The jurors have agreed and their verdict will settle the question."

"And win my bet," said Raoul. His friend shrugged his shoulders and kept still.

"The Court! Hats off!" shouted the crier. The magistrates had taken their seats, the jurors were in their places, and the prosecuting attorney had resumed his place. The counsel for the defense had not left the room. All were present but the prisoner.

By the light of the lamps which had just been lighted, the robe of the president, flanked by those of the assistant judges, glowed like a red spot between two black ones.

The audience was excited, and the murmur of the anxious spectators was heard, as at the

theater when the curtain rises on the supreme scene of a drama which has been impatiently expected.

More agitated than he appeared Robert du Plessis looked at the jurors. He tried to read their faces, but with little success. Their faces only expressed fatigue, and satisfaction at being relieved from a long and arduous service. There was one, however, who was distinguished from the others by his dress and the expression of his face.

He was still young, forty at most, and his eyes shone with a peculiar light; they were restless and uneasy eyes which saw everything and fixed themselves nowhere. Robert fancied they rested on him with a certain persistence, but he must have been mistaken, for he did not remember ever to have seen this juryman who was dressed like a club-man, and he was surprised that he had not noticed him during the session as he sat at the end of the highest bench—the place reserved for the foreman,

who is chosen by lot. But Robert had only looked at the accused and the free and honest citizens who were to be her judges left the room at the same time as she.

They had just returned and this man was about to read the verdict.

At the request of the president, he rose, placed his hand on his heart, and in the midst of an affecting silence, pronounced in a sonorous voice the consecrated formula: "On my honor and my conscience, before God and before men, the decision of the jury is:" He paused between this invariable preamble and the words which followed, just as an actor does before uttering some word for effect. And the words were: "Not guilty."

An "Ah!" went up from every breast, but there were neither cheers nor murmurs. It expressed the relief of the people after their long waiting,—nothing more. And to tell the truth, opinions differed widely.

The procureur-general did not try to repress a gesture of dissatisfaction, but the judges retained their impassability of countenance, and the counsel for the defense, smiling, bowed like a man who was expecting this result. Nothing remained but to inform the prisoner, and the president gave the order for her to be brought in. She entered with her head high, her face unmoved, her look steady, and heard the clerk read the verdict. She evidently already knew what to expect, for a glance of her counsel had reassured her. Then, the president said gravely and slowly:

"We, president of the Court of Assizes of the Seine, by virtue of the power vested in us by the law; seeing the decision of the jury, declare the said Angelique Rabutin, widow de Noyal, acquitted of the charge brought against her and we command that she be set at liberty immediately, if she be not detained for other cause."

Robert du Plessis knew the president, and it

was through him that he had a reserved place at the trial. It seemed to him that the severe magistrate had slipped rapidly over the words *the said* prescribed by the code, which does not pride itself on politeness, and he was obliged to him for it, although he was not absolutely convinced of the innocence of the Baroness.

He was still in doubt, but he wished to believe it, and he was not at all sorry that the jury had acquitted a woman at whose house he had been received before the tragic event which had brought her into the Court of Assizes. Appearances were against her, but the proofs were lacking, and Robert preferred agreeing with the verdict to persisting in suspecting Mme. de Noyal of assassinating a young girl whom he had been so near loving.

Human justice punishes, but it does not restore, and a condemnation, even if it had been just, would not have restored Jeanne Caristie, the victim of an unexplained if not inexplicable crime.

Robert du Plessis began then to rejoice at the happy issue of this judicial drama, and even to pity the woman who had been marked by an ineffaceable stain and whose acquittal would only partially reinstate her, for the world is so constituted that accusation and calumny always leave a taint. He had forgotten what the acquittal was going to cost him. His friend Raoul recalled it to his mind by saying gaily:

"You owe me fifty louis, you know."

"I know it," replied Robert, "I will pay them and not regret it either, for I would willingly have given fifty louis that I might not have to deplore that I had been friends with a criminal."

"Well, you take your part with a good grace and I compliment you. It is never too late to find out that one is mistaken. And now I hope you will again go to see the poor Baroness. You owe her a visit after the crisis which she has passed through, as much as if she had

recovered from an illness which threatened her life."

"It is not the same thing at all, and I have not the least desire to congratulate her."

"Bah! you will go all the same, and I shall ask you to introduce me. I am dying to know her."

"As for me, I wish I had never known her, and as for presenting you, that would not be easy, for I do not suppose she will open her house again. It is not as if she had passed the season at Aix."

"Why not? That would be very fearless, and would be the best way of showing that she had nothing to be ashamed of."

"That may be; but no one would visit her."

"On the contrary, I bet that she would be obliged to refuse people."

"Enough of such bets," said Robert, angrily. "The play is over; let us go."

It was time, for the audience had risen, the Court, the jurors and the accused had already

gone, and the two friends had only to follow the crowd which noisily evacuated the court-room. This they did, and with difficulty succeeded in getting out of the Palais de Justice, the doors were so blocked.

Raoul Vignemale, careless optimist that he was, lighted a cigar while descending the grand staircase. His comrade was in no such hurry to smoke. Although not easily affected, having always lived to amuse himself, and never taking anything too seriously, the judicial drama which he had just witnessed had impressed him very strongly, and he was more preoccupied than he would like to have confessed, with his future relations with Mme. de Noyal. He would be almost obliged to see her again, although he had said the contrary, and he was not decided about it. He hoped that she would relieve him from his embarrassment by expatriating herself, or at least by withdrawing from society so that she might be forgotten.

The jury had acquitted her but Robert doubted her innocence. He was traveling in Scotland when the murder was committed in the park of a villa in the suburbs of Paris. He heard of the event through the papers, then almost immediately of the arrest of the Baroness. The proceedings of this strange trial had not enlightened him very much. He would have liked to know more before coming to a conclusion, but he had obtained no further information—not concerning the facts—but about the causes.

While waiting for an opportunity, he wished to separate himself from his friend Raoul, to whom he would not confide his perplexities and whose company would have hindered him. He was seeking a pretext, when he saw, in a group at the foot of the staircase, the man who had read the verdict. The others were also jurymen and seemed to be talking among themselves of the case which they had just decided.

Robert wanted very much to hear what they were saying, but he could not mingle in their conversation, and was passing on his way just as they separated, after shaking hands with each other. He followed with his eyes the one whom he had observed in the court-room, and was not surprised to see him get into an elegant coupe which was waiting on the Boulevard du Palais. This personage had already seemed to him to belong to that section of the world which rides in its carriage, and as the only one of his kind on the jury. He regretted that he did not know his name, but he hoped to meet him some day in a parlor or club-room, and resolved in that case to get some one to introduce him, for the sole purpose of finding out what he thought of the trial of the Baroness.

"Who is that juror who is bowing to you?" suddenly asked Vignemale, stopping in the middle of the large court.

"What,—a juror?" murmured du Plessis.

"Yes, I saw him on the benches."

"That is my upholsterer—M. Dauphin. Do you think he was on the jury?"

"I am sure of it. One does not soon forget a head like that; it seems to me he is anxious to speak to you. Is he going to present his bill?"

"No, for I do not owe him anything, but I should like to talk with him."

"Really? Well, then I will leave you. I do not care to talk with this famous merchant, and I will be off to the club, where I shall find a card party perhaps, by way of an appetizer before dinner."

"As you please," said Robert, who, as we have seen, wished to be relieved of his companion, "I will try to join you there, but I wish to give an order to M. Dauphin, and since I have met him here, I will improve the opportunity."

Vignemale was already some way off, for he too was glad to separate from his friend. He preferred the emotions of play to those of the

court-room, and it was difficult for him to pass a whole day without a game of cards.

When Robert was alone, within a few steps of the upholsterer, he went to him and addressed him familiarly.

"Well! Monsieur Dauphin, you were on the jury and the trial must have seemed very long to you."

"One must do his duty as a citizen," responded the tradesman, drawing himself up, "but I confess that this has been pretty hard."

"It certainly must be hard to leave business when one is at the head of a house like yours."

"Oh! that is nothing; but when it is a question of a woman's life——"

"Fortunately you acquitted her."

"Yes—by a small majority. There were seven for acquittal and five against. Six against six the result would have been the same, but a change of only two would have condemned her."

"Is it indiscreet to ask how you voted?"

"No, Monsieur, for I have the courage of my convictions. I voted for conviction, but I should also have voted for extenuating circumstances. I am absolutely opposed to capital punishment."

"Oh! then I am certain that you voted conscientiously, I, perhaps, should have acquitted Mme. de Noyal."

"If she was acquitted, it was because she had an able advocate."

"Who? Her counsel?"

"No, the foreman of the jury. Ah! but she owes him a big debt."

"What!" cried Robert, "did he speak in favor of the accused?"

"Yes, Monsieur," responded the upholsterer, "and much better than her counsel did. When we went into the jury-room, we were all for conviction. Well, in three-quarters of an hour he had changed the majority—and not by any high-flown rhetoric either—but by talking simply, just as he would have talked in a parlor.

He has reasons which convince you—if you only listen to him. My mind was already made up, and yet there was a moment when I was almost persuaded."

"He should seek admission to the bar; he would make a hundred thousand francs a year."

"Oh! there is no need of that! He is very rich. You must know his name, the Marquis de Chenerailles."

"No, I do not know him at all."

"That is astonishing, for he is often mentioned in the fashionable journals, and I should very much like to be his upholsterer, for he is going to furnish a superb apartment which he has just hired in the neighborhood of the Champs Elysees."

"If I should make his acquaintance I will recommend you to him," said Robert du Plessis, a little ironically; "but I think he must know Mme. de Noyal, since he defended her so ably."

"That cannot be, or the prosecution would have challenged him."

"True! and it permitted this gentleman to take his seat, very fortunately too, for perhaps she was innocent."

"I doubt it, but I am very well pleased that she came out of it safely, for if she had been condemned to death I should have had bad dreams, and I have just passed through so many emotions——"

"That you long to get home to recover yourself. Good evening M. Dauphin. Come to my house some morning, I want to renew the paper on my smoking-room," and without stopping to hear the upholsterer's thanks, Robert went with accelerated steps toward the Boulevard du Palais.

CHAPTER II.

Whither was he going so rapidly? He did not know himself, but he felt impelled to walk fast in the open air after eight hours in the stifling atmosphere of the court-room.

He went up the boulevard, and instead of going over the Pont au Change, turned to the left, by the Quay de l' Horologe. Night had come, and there were very few people on the quay, which is not much frequented even in day time, especially at the entrance which is darkened by the high towers of the Conciergerie,* for farther on, in the house which separates it from the old Place Dauphine, there are shops and lighted windows. Robert walked along the parapet by the river. He was pleased with the isolation for it permitted him to become absorbed in his reflections, and he went on without looking in front of him, so that he

* A prison.

just escaped running against two men who were talking on the sidewalk, near a carriage.

He hastened to get down into the roadway, when by the light of a gas jet he recognized the foreman of the jury. This gentleman was about to enter his carriage. One foot was already in, and his interlocutor was holding the door open, as the commissionaires do at the entrance of the theatres.

The latter certainly did not belong to what the bourgeois call the *classe dirigeante* (directing class).

He wore a soft felt hat, a pink cravat, and a checked suit of clothes. He would have made a fine appearance on the outside boulevards, at the hour when the gentlemen who wear caps with three flaps walk abroad, for he had the physique of a workman; he was not more than twenty-five years of age, had a leaden complexion and wore "heart-breakers" plastered on his sallow temples. What could M.

de Chenerailles have to say to such a queer fellow? Robert asked himself this question as he brusquely left the path so as to avoid meeting them face to face.

Although he had got out of the way so quickly, he had seen the gentleman put a bank-note into the hand of the blackguard, and then enter his carriage which rolled rapidly toward the Pont Neuf.

The man with the soft hat, after pocketing the note, expressed his joy by executing a fling which would have made a success in a ball of the barriere and started off in the same direction as the coupe, without noticing Robert du Plessis, whom he left behind.

Why did Robert immediately follow him? From mere curiosity, without any hope of satisfying it, and even without knowing what he should gain, if, by any chance, he should discover the motive of the clandestine relations between the lord of Chenerailles and a street loafer.

At any other time, he would have thought very little of this mystery. Of what importance was it to him that the person whom M. Dauphin admired was a false lord?—the species is not rare in Paris—or perhaps the mysterious chief of some association of low fellows? He had seen him for the first time on the jury bench, and probably would never see him again, although the upholsterer had said he was well launched in fashionable society.

But this evening, disturbed by a series of uuforeseen events and strange coincidences, Robert du Plessis was disposed to be restive, like a horse startled by the unexpected report of a cannon.

He had reached the age of thirty without having done any serious work or having any serious thoughts.

He was the son of a grave magistrate and a pious mother, who had died when he was very young, and at his majority he found himself

master of a handsome fortune, which he spent freely.

He knew no other law than his own fancy, and the only tender sentiment which he had experienced was inspired by the unfortunate young girl who had been murdered in Mme. de Noyal's park. He had never confessed this sentiment to its object, and he believed that he had concealed it so well that even Mme. de Noyal had not suspected it.

However that may have been, Raoul now knew how it was, for Robert had allowed it to escape him that he had thought of asking the hand of Mlle. Caristie. Raoul Vignemale, broker by profession, and a gay fellow, would willingly have told big stories of his matrimonial designs: but he was incapable of betraying a secret, and if he thought about it at all, would not think long.

Robert could not forget the poor, dead girl so easily, and he longed to avenge her. Unoccupied as he was, he had nothing better to do

than to search for the assassin, for he was now inclined to believe that the jury was not mistaken in acquitting the accused, and he would be very proud and very happy to find the real criminal. It may have been a chimerical enterprise; but this was another reason why it should tempt Robert, who, in spite of the scepticism which he affected, had a strong tendency to imitate the chevalier Don Quixote de la Mancha, redresser of wrongs and seeker of adventures.

The accident of two successive meetings seemed to indicate a trail. M. Dauphin had stopped him in the Palace yard to inform him that Mme. de Noyal owed her release to this foreman of the jury whom he had just surprised talking familiarly with a man of suspicious appearance, on a deserted quay.

Robert's imagination supplied the rest. He fancied that he held the end of a thread which would lead to some interesting discoveries, and meanwhile he put himself on the track of the

person who had just received a bank-note as a gratuity.

This was surely too much to give to a door opener, and it might easily be supposed that it had been given in payment for some important service.

The rogue was going away with his nose in the air and his hands in his pocket. Du Plessis, who had never before followed anybody, excepting pretty women, kept a little too near him, for he exposed himself to the danger of being observed, an imprudence which a professional detective would not have committed; but the man, having come out on the Pont Neuf without turning round, ran after an omnibus which was passing, caught it while in motion, and climbed nimbly upon the roof.

Robert did not hesitate to do the same, and this time there was no risk, for the roofs are free to all, so long as there is any room, and there was still one place left just beside the last passenger.

Robert could now examine him at his leisure, and he was sure of not losing trace of him, for he had resolved to descend when his neighbor did.

He was ignorant, however, where this pursuit would lead him. He was not familiar with the routes of the omnibuses, for he never used them, and he would have been puzzled to guess by what line he was traveling.

The omnibus was painted in dark green; it had red lanterns and went towards the right bank of the Seine. He did not know anything more about it, but he had already sacrificed his evening, and was not sorry to go wherever the man, whom he intended to keep in sight, should lead.

He observed him stealthily, and the longer he watched the less he doubted that this citizen was a member of one of those social categories upon which a recent law has imposed a penalty—quite new to our code—the penalty of banishment. To whatever place he might

be bound today, sooner or later, he would arrive at Cayenne.

He had just rolled a cigarette which he lighted by scratching a match upon his trousers, and while smoking he would often feel in the pocket of his vest, into which, in default of a pocket-book, he had slipped the violet bank-note with which the beautifully gloved hand of the Marquis had so delighted him.

Doubtless, he was not accustomed to carry in his vest-pocket paper of the Bank of France and he did not wish to lose it.

He could not be called ugly, for his features were regular, his eyes bright, and his figure slender. But his face, faded before its time, had an insolent and cunning expression. It was the face of a man intelligent, audacious, shrewd and ready for any kind of villainous work.

Decidedly, the Marquis de Chenerailles had a vicious acquaintance in this man, and Robert du Plessis was not wrong in suspecting him.

But he did not stop there, and he had a great desire to make this pretty fellow talk, but he was at a loss to know how to do this without putting him on his guard. At last he took out a cigar and asked him for a light.

"How then! with pleasure of course, my lord," cried the young man, presenting the end of his cigarette without removing it from his mouth. The two faces almost touched one another, and Robert noticed that his neighbor took his face in at one glance, while saying: "That London cigar smells very good. I shall buy a package of them this evening."

Robert did not venture to offer him one, and there was a brief silence. But the cigarette smoker seemed anxious to chat, and soon continued:

"I am able to treat myself to some of that sort; I have done a good day's work. I have just been at the trial of a woman of the upper ten."

"How was that?" said du Plessis, feigning not to understand him.

"Yes—a Baroness. She was acquitted." Robert had succeeded at the first attempt, much better than he had hoped, for when he asked his neighbor for a light, in order to engage him in conversation, he had no idea that he would talk without provocation of Mme. de Noyal.

This unexpected beginning put him at his ease, and he was no longer afraid of being suspected if he prolonged the conversation to obtain further information on the subject. He dissimulated his surprise and said with the most natural air in the world: "Oh! yes—I remember, the Baroness who murdered her cousin. The papers have talked of nothing else for the last three months. How! Did they not bring her in guilty?"

"She had a hard time—an ordinary citizen would have got hard labor for life; but the *gouzesses* of the upper ten always manage to get

out of it. I should not have acquitted her, but I am satisfied all the same, because the *curieux* [1] are made fools of. The *avocat-becheur* [2] was annoyed—you ought to have seen him."

Although not very conversant with this *argot*, du Plessis was too thorough a Parisian not to know that, in the language of rogues, the judges are called *curieux*, and that the *avocat-becheur* is the public prosecutor.

This fellow was of the same opinion as the upholsterer and if he had been sworn he would not have voted with the noble personage who had just greased his palm on the Quay de l' Horologe, a singularity to be noted.

"You were fortunate in being able to get in" said Robert, careful not to contradict him. "It was pretended that tickets were sold as dear as orchestra chairs at the opera."

"That is easily understood," said his neighbor gravely: "a criminal case is like a first night at the theater. It is necessary to maneuver a

1. Literally, inquisitive ones. 2. Advocate-digger.

little to secure reserved seats. I understand that business. I have done it in my time—but I looked on as I stood in line. I was at the back of the room, but I could see very well. She is blonde. For myself I like brunettes; but you can't take blondes like her up by the shovelful. She has eyes I can tell you. She will have no trouble to get married again—and besides she is very well off."

How did he know that Mme. de Noyal was a rich widow? Through the papers perhaps, but more probably through M. de Chenerailles, thought du Plessis, and he congratulated himself that he had followed this rogue.

Thus far he heard nothing of any significance, but he did not despair of hearing more by listening to the chatter of this fellow. He shrank from questioning him, for that would be putting himself on familiar terms all at once, and he had not decided to go so far as that. He preferred to listen, while limiting himself to keeping up the talk.

"Yes," said he, "she has a large fortune it appears."

"A hundred thousand francs a year! that would keep me in boots. If I had that much I could slip along smoothly. I have'nt, but I have nothing to complain of," continued the man, plunging his fingers into his vest-pocket to be sure that the note was still there.

"Then business is good?" asked Robert.

"Oh! it has its ups-and-downs. I have done well to-day. I have bread on the shelf and I have an idea that I shall soon have some butter to put on it."

He counts on a repetition of the perquisites, thought Robert.

And he had no doubt that this equivocal individual was in the pay of M. de Chenerailles. What could have been the service he had performed for the defender of the Baroness? Robert could not guess, but he was only the more anxious to push the inquiry which was so well begun. It was evident that the man with

the soft hat had no idea that his fellow-traveler had seen him pocket a royal *pour-boire*; for if he had suspected it he would not have made any allusion to the gift, nor boasted of expecting others. Robert could, therefore, advance a little farther without any risk of being mistrusted.

"Do you operate at the Bourse?" he asked.

"Yes, sometimes," responded his neighbor, visibly flattered at being taken for a speculator or even a *remisies*, "but that is too risky, one has to drink bubbles too often, and I like my own profession better—I am a commercial broker."

"That is safer."

"Oh! It is not always what I should like, but I have just put my hands on a good client and that will be all right. Are you in business?"

"No, I live on my income."

"Oh! that would suit me; unfortunately my father forgot to leave me any income. I am not any the worse off for that, and it does not

prevent my enjoying myself when I am in funds. I am going up to the Butte this evening, as you see."

Robert understood what Butte he was speaking of, and he was not sorry to know that the omnibus was going to Montmartre.

"That is the best place there is to enjoy oneself. Are you going up to the old Butte?" asked his amiable neighbor.

"I am going to see one of my friends, who is a painter and lives there," Robert hastened to reply, delighted to have found a pretext for going to the end of the route, without arousing the suspicions of the self-styled commercial broker.

"Painters, the place is full of them, and I know some who are good *zigs*—my sister is a model, and I used to pose in the studios sometimes."

Du Plessis knew some artists also, but he could not dream of asking them for information of a man whose name he did not know.

He resolved to come back some time and stroll about Montmartre with the friends he had there, and he did not despair of meeting him, pointing him out to them and thus learning the truth about this singular broker. Meanwhile the heavy carriage was approaching the end of the route. It had stopped at the Place de la Bourse, then in the Rue de Chateaudun, and was now mounting the steep Rue des Martyrs.

The two men alone remained on the roof of the omnibus, and they had stopped talking, Robert from fear of saying too much, the other, perhaps, because he was afraid that he had said quite enough. The difficult moment for Robert was approaching. It was a question how he could keep his man in sight, when he should have set his foot on the ground, and how to follow him without being seen. It was not an easy thing to do, but it cost nothing to try.

The omnibus stopped in front of the coach office, near the fountain in the middle of the Place Pigalle.

"Here we are," said the neighbor rising quickly, "I am not sorry that we have arrived, for it makes one awfully hungry and still more thirsty. I am going to fill up in good style and drain a bottle or two. Good luck to you, my prince."

And, without waiting for any response, he tumbled down without even touching the steps.

Du Plessis, before descending, saw him direct his steps towards a large house on the corner of the boulevard on the other side of the square.

He knew this house, which was lighted from top to bottom, for he had once breakfasted there; he knew that it was the most popular restaurant in the quarter, and he was glad that the man was going to dine there, for he would not have dared to enter a low-class eating-house behind him, while he could dine at the "Abbaye de Theleme" without causing remark. His neighbor of the outside would not be surprised to see him there, and Robert felt that he would not try to renew the conversation. He

would watch the man from a distance while he was dining, and prepare to finish at the same time and go out immediately behind him; for he had decided to follow him until he should know where he lodged.

Once started, Robert did not stop, even when on a perilous road, any more than does a hunter who has just started a hare hesitate to go through thickets bristling with thorns.

The game which he was pursuing had just disappeared on the staircase of the restaurant whose Rabelesque sign was displayed in Gothic letters on a brick facade.

Robert lost no time in entering after him.

There was a cafe on the ground floor, but the man had not stopped there, and Robert found him installed in the back of the large salon on the first floor.

Many of the tables were already occupied, and Robert was looking for a place favorable to his designs, when he saw an artist of his acquaintance who had just seated himself near

the door, immediately opposite the suspect, and who perceiving him, cried:

"What, you here? What luck! You must dine with me; sit down right there, my friend!"

Du Plessis needed no urging, and he could not have chosen a better place, for his man could not go out without passing quite near him.

"What good wind blew you to our mountain?" asked the painter, whose name was Cadornac.

"My dear fellow," responded du Plessis gaily, "I should find it difficult to explain it to you. Just fancy that the idea suddenly came to me to jump into an omnibus, without knowing whither it was going. It dropped me at Place Pigalle."

"I bless that omnibus, for I see you too seldom; and now that I have you, I am not going to let go of you all the evening. When we leave here I will show you the curiosities of the quarter, from the Chat Noir to the Elysee Mont-

martre, passing the Moulin Rouge. You will not be bored, I promise you."

"I am never bored in your company," said Robert politely.

He meant what he said, for he appreciated his friend at his full value. Pierre Cadornac was a talented artist, a sensible and polite man and a jolly companion. He asked nothing better than to be his guest; only, he mentally reserved the right to resume his liberty after dinner. He sat down to the table, and did honor to thc cooking of the "Abbaye de Theleme," at the same time keeping watch, from the corner of his eye, of his former neighbor, who noticed no one, so occupied was he in filling and emptying his glass:

"You see that we are not in the Cafe Anglais," said Cadornac laughing. "The company is very much mixed here as you see—not a few good citizens with their wives, more or less legitimate—over there are some pupils of a school of sculpture on the Boulevard Clichy

who have come here to regale themselves, for a novelty—farther on, to our right, the feminine element is brilliantly represented by the fine flower of the frequenters of the Circus Fernando—you and I represent the ton—it is complete."

"And very amusing," added du Plessis. "The man opposite us is a veritable type—that fellow with his hat on his head and who has on such a pretty pink cravat."

"Oh! he does not come here very often, but a fellow of that kind can only be seen in this quarter—that one is one of the celebrities of the Butte—he is the illustrious, the incomparable, the only Fil-de-Soie."

"This is the first time I have ever heard of this illustrious person. To what does Mr. Fil-de-Soie owe his notoriety?" asked Robert smiling.

"Oh!" said Cadornac, "it has not yet reached the grand boulevards. He owes it to his talent as a dancer."

"At the Opera?"

"No, and I think his dancing would not have any success there, but he is without a rival at Montmartre. The stars of the fancy-dance carry him off. Nini Patte-en-l'air goes mad over him, the Goulue will have no other partner."

"That is an honor which he ought to be proud of. Has he no other business than to use his legs?"

"I know of no other—and I assure you that he makes a good living at it—but as he dances only in the evening, I suppose that he follows some trade in the day time if only to keep out of the way of the police who pick a quarrel very willingly with people who have no profession."

Robert might have told his friend that Fil-de- Soie pretended to be a commercial broker, but he contented himself by saying carelessly.

"He must live on the Butte."

"Or in the neighborhood, if he have any

home—and I doubt it very much—he does not dwell—he perches, it is for people like him that furnished lodgings were invented, and the quarter abounds in them."

"The devil," thought Robert, "I shall have trouble to find out anything about him from his concierge."

"But," continued Cadornac, "he is sure to be found, every evening from nine o'clock till midnight, at the Moulin-Rouge or at the Elysee—and if you are curious to see him kick about you are in luck—there is a grand fete to-night at the Moulin Rouge—it is only two steps from here and I will accompany you, when we have finished our dinner."

"I should like to go," said Robert, who had no reason for refusing now that he knew something of the habits of Fil-de-Soie.

He was not obliged to conceal himself any further, for Fil-de-Soie would not be surprised to see the gentleman with whom he had traveled, at a public ball which everybody attended.

Robert did not expect to gain anything more this evening, but he was satisfied to know where he could find him again, and he was not unwilling to witness his choregraphic exercises.

He had begun to consider the incidents which had disturbed his mind, with more coolness, and to think that the colloquy on the Quay de l Horologe might be very simply explained.

It did not follow, because the foreman of the jury paid money to a rascal like Fil-de-Soie, that the relations between them had any connection with the criminal case which had just been tried.

These relations, of course, did the Marquis no credit, but there was more than one way of explaining them. for Fil-de-Soie, a public dancer, could be useful in many ways to a man who was looking for easy conquests. Robert, however, had not entirely changed his first opinion. He could still see, indistinctly through the obscurity, some complicated web,

and while acknowledging that he might be mistaken, he did not forget M. de Chenerailles and his acquaintance with a person who was game for the police. Only he was no longer in such a hurry to clear up the mystery.

Fil-de-Soie took no notice of him although he saw him perfectly, but emptied his second bottle of wine, which bore a red seal and must have been a kind of Burgundy, and ate with frightful ardor without considering the consequences of his Pantagruelic feast.

He carried good sail, as sailors say, and unlike tenors who cannot sing if they dine before going on the stage, he never danced better than after drinking.

When he asked for his bill, Robert and Cadornac were at their coffee.

Robert noticed that he paid with the bank-note and that it was a note of five hundred francs; this he ascertained when the waiter returned the change on a plate. M. de

Chenerailles recompensed generously the people who served him.

After pocketing the louis and the small bills with an air as indifferent as if he had been accustomed to carry so large a sum about him, Fil-de-Soie went out of the room without looking at any one.

"He seems to be rolling in gold," said du Plessis under his breath.

"It is only the base professions that pay" replied Cadornac, philosophically. "But it is not far from ten o'clock—the quadrille of the celebrities is about to commence. Let us go to see Fil-de-Soie at work."

Nearly all the people had left. The gay talk of the painter had prolonged the repast, much to Robert's satisfaction, for he had not wished to leave the place before the man whom he was watching. The two friends went out upon the square and walked towards the ball-room which had been recently opened in the place of a less popular one.

A colossal mill with colored glasses whose sparkling fans turned without cessation, indicated from a distance the entrance to this new Eden, which had been created by an intelligent director who knew how to attract the distinguished public from the Jardin de Paris and other fashionable resorts.

Robert du Plessis had been there before, but he had always come in a carriage, and was surprised to see the boulevard which led to it, almost as lively at this time of night as the Boulevard des Italiens. The people were of a different class and the street was less brilliantly lighted; but it was livelier, more stirring, that is to say gayer. Cadornac took it for a text and praised the delights of this eccentric quarter, where the cafes are not closed until two o'clock in the morning, and he laughed at Robert, who referred to certain nocturnal assaults of which he had read in the papers.

"Assaults, never!" affirmed the artist; "nothing more than drunken quarrels. I would not be afraid to walk here all night with a hundred thousand francs in my pocket book."

Robert took his word for it and they followed the crowd which was besieging the doors. This was the time for the fashionable tide, as the morning is for the cavaliers and amazons in the Bois de Boulogne.

Well-appointed coupes stopped in front of the large door illuminated *a giorno*, and deposited upon the pavement, not only elegant women of a certain class, but also many clubmen with flowers in their buttonholes.

Robert was not astonished, for he knew that the Moulin-Rouge was the fashion, but he was stupefied when he saw the gentleman of the Quay de l' Horologe get out of one of the carriages.

A man who has been on a jury, however, surely has a right to amuse himself at a ball, after sitting all day, above all when he has not

condemned the accused—which was the case in this instance. To cap the climax, this juror saluted Pierre Cadornac, in passing, and the artist returned the salute with warmth.

"Do you know that gentleman?" quickly asked du Plessis.

"Not very well, do you?"

"No, I only know his name. He is called the Marquis de Chenerailles."

"I did not know that he was a Marquis, but I know that he is very rich. I painted his portrait last year, during the exposition, and he paid me royally."

"So you went to his house?"

"No, he came to mine; but if it is of any interest to you I will tell you that he lives at No. 19 Rue Galilee."

"I do not care anything about it," du Plessis hastened to say, for he did not wish his friend to understand the situation.

"His portrait was a success at the last salon," said Cadornac. "I did not deserve much

credit, for the gentleman has a very striking face—he has the look of a Fra Diavolo."

"A blonde Diavolo then."

"That is true—he is a blonde—he borders on the red—but he has the eyes of a bird of prey. I never get tired of studying those eyes when I meet them at the Moulin-Rouge—he comes there quite often—and I suspect that he comes to see the women."

This was quite probable, and admitting that the Marquis employed Fil-de Soie in some private work, it could hardly be supposed that he would give him an interview in a public place.

Robert told himself also that he should have less trouble in getting information concerning this gentleman than of a nomad without hearth or home.

He felt that the evening had not been lost, for he now knew the address of M. de Chenerailles. In time, and as well known as he was, Robert would surely be able to obtain more

exact information. So, for this night he could suspend the pursuit of both. He would remain an hour at the Moulin-Rouge to see the attractions, after which there would be nothing to hinder his going quietly to bed, reserving the pursuit for the next day, if it should seem best.

He entered arm in arm with Cadornac, who led him directly to the immense hall where the dancing was going on.

The ball was at its height. Fifty couples rushed madly about, urged by the loud blare of the brass instruments and surrounded by a triple row of enthusiastic spectators.

It took the two friends some time to push their way to the favored quadrilles in which figured the principal members of a ballet corps who had not taken lessons of M. Merante of the Grand Opera; [1]Rayon d' Or, [2]Etoile Filante, [3]Grille d' Egout, [4]La Goulue and others less illustrious; but they arrived at the psychological

1 Golden Ray. 2 Falling Star. 3 Sewer Grating. 4 The Glutton.

moment in which La Goulue was executing a step impossible to describe: there were leaps like a mad goat, inversions of the body which made one fear that she was going to break in two, and flights of skirts which completely dazzled the eyes.

The spectators stamped their feet in joy. It was soon the turn of Fil-de-Soie to come on the stage to dance a pas seul, and Robert saw at once that Cadornac had not over-praised the talent of this King of the Moulin-Rouge.

Fil-de-Soie had a dance of his own, a dance which distinguished him from the jumpers hired by the administration to dislocate themselves. He could do with his body whatever he pleased, just as they could, but his features were as mobile as his joints, and he accompanied his contortions with expressions of the face and gestures whose significance escaped Robert de Plessis.

Thus he imitated the motions of a man who counts crowns with one hand, and with

the other he restrained the beatings of his heart, raising his eyes to heaven at the same time.

The gallery understood, perhaps, for it writhed with laughter, whilst Robert wondered to whom this pantomime was addressed.

As he passed the spectators in review, he saw M. de Chenerailles in the first row. Was Fil-de-Soie, by his attitudes, thanking this gentleman for having given him a note of five hundred francs? Robert was tempted to think so. But soon Fil-de-Soie changed his mimicry. Without ceasing to twist his legs, he stretched out his head and struck the nape of his neck with the side of his hand, imitating, no doubt, the fall of the axe on the neck of a condemned person.

"Bravo," cried a voice, "that is the guillotine step, by persuasion." "Vive Fil-de-Soie!" shouted the spectators. Fil-de-Soie stopped suddenly, took his head between his hands and made believe to throw himself at the

feet of M. de Chenerailles, who was not looking at him, for just at that moment he was complimenting a pretty danseuse who was very close to him.

The quadrille was over. Some mad fellows proposed to carry Fil-de-Soie and La Goulue off in triumph.

The couple stole away at the suggestion, but there was a rush which broke the circle and separated the two friends.

Robert had considerable trouble in extricating himself, and, when he had succeeded, he found himself among people whom he did not know.

M. de Chenerailles, as well as M. Cadornac, had disappeared.

Nothing more was lacking to cool the ardor of Robert du Plessis and give another direction to his thoughts.

He knew that he should gain nothing by remaining any longer at the ball—he had seen enough to convince him that Fil-de-Soie and

M. de Chenerailles were acquainted and the confusion had disgusted him with watching them.

"To the devil with all these people!" he growled as he went toward the door.

"I will go to see Cadornac to-morrow and he will excuse me for leaving him. In the meanwhile I will go home and go to bed."

He longed to get away, but he was dying of thirst.

After crossing the large hall, he sat down at an empty table in a corner of the vestibule opening into the grand entrance of the building. He called for a glass of iced lemonade, which he paid for before drinking, without observing three individuals who were drinking punch beside him and who could see that his pocket-book was well filled. Robert was too pre-occupied to notice his neighbors. He had soon swallowed the refreshing beverage and left the place without perceiving that the punch drinkers had risen at the same time.

On his way out he met a number of late comers, and, as soon as he was outside, he hastened to cross the boulevard to be out of the way of the crowd which blocked up the approach to the Moulin Rouge.

The fresh air calmed his spirits.

Du Plessis lived on the Avenue Percier at the corner of the Rue de la Boetie. He had only to go down the Rue Blanche as far as the Place de la Trinite and then walk up the Boulevard Haussman. The distance was not great and the weather was fine for walking.

The Place Blanche was brilliantly lighted, but the Rue Blanche was dark, for the nocturnal liveliness so much boasted of by Cadornac did not extend much beyond the Boulevard Clichy.

Higher up on the Butte, it is almost deserted; toward Paris there is the bourgeois quiet of a small village of capitalists who go to bed early.

It was not yet midnight, and the passers-by were already becoming rare. The merchants had closed their shops, and the silence of this solitary way seemed the more profound after the noise of the boulevard.

Robert did not observe the contrast. He went straight on grazing the houses on the left and recalling the scenes of this eventful evening.

The more he reflected, the more he was convinced that he had exaggerated the importance of the succession of facts, independent each of the other, and that he had been the dupe of his own imagination.

There was nothing positive in it all, excepting the acquittal of Mme. de Noyal.

He could not be sorry for that, and now the only thing for him to decide was whether he would see her again.

Now he had all the time to think about it, and he said to himself that night brings counsel.

At the upper end of the Rue Mansait, which cuts the Rue Blanche obliquely, he was jostled by two men who passed by him and were soon out of sight, for they walked much faster than he. A moment after he crossed the Rue Chaptal and continued on his way, and when he had reached the half-open gate of the Cite Gaillard he had the intuition that some one was following him.

He did not hear him; he felt it and he was in the act of turning around, when a strap was thrown around his neck from behind after grazing his face. Lifted from the ground by a violent push, he lost his footing and remained suspended on the back of his assailant, but he did not lose consciousness immediately, for he could hear the man who held him say:

"Go through him quick! there is a carriage coming."

Robert could even feel the hands which were fumbling in his pockets; then, suffocated by the strap, he ceased to think and was no longer

conscious of what was happening to him. When he regained his senses, shocked by the fall on the pavement, he comprehended that the scoundrels who had just robbed him had let him fall so that they might escape. And, on opening his eyes, he saw bending over him, a gentleman who had hold of his hands to help him to rise. Robert with his help was soon on his feet.

"Are you wounded, monsieur," asked the generous unknown.

And, as Robert still quite giddy, did not reply immediately, he resumed quickly:

"Surely I am not mistaken—I met you at the door of the Moulin Rouge. You were with M. Cadornac."

"Yes, it was I," stammered Robert.

"Then I am more fortunate than I thought, since I have been of service to a friend of an artist whom I highly esteem, and who is very congenial to me."

At these words, Robert, who had now come to himself, recognized his deliverer. He owed his life to M. de Chenerailles, and this last adventure was not the least extraordinary of all which he had experienced since he had left the the Hall of Assizes.

"Unfortunately, I arrived too late to prevent the miserable scoundrels from robbing you," continued the marquis, "and they had time to get out of the way. I had just put my head out of the window to tell the coachman to hurry, when I saw them attack you. They used what they call the 'stroke of Father Francis.' One holds you on his back and the others rob you."

"I believe that they have really left me nothing; but I do not complain, for they might have killed me—and but for you, sir, they certainly would. I do not know how to thank you."

"Thank me for what? I have done just what you would have done in my place. I

happened to be passing through the Rue Blanche at the moment when the villains attacked you. If you owe gratitude to anybody it is to my coachman, who took this route instead of following the outer boulevard to take me to the Rue Galilee where I live. But after such a shock, you are in no condition for walking, and you must permit me to take you home in my carriage. Where do you live?"

This was said so naturally that Robert could not refuse, and besides he had great need of aid, for he felt the effect of his fall and would have found it difficult to walk to the Avenue Percier.

He gave his address, and without making any apologies, got into M. de Cheneraille's coupe.

A moment after, these gentlemen were rolling along, seated side by side as if they were a pair of dear friends.

When du Plessis had surprised the marquis

in conference with Fil-de-Soie, he did not foresee that a few hours later he would be riding home in his carriage. Everything comes to pass.

And du Plessis, who generally went from one extreme to the other, no longer mistrusted this gentleman whom he had suspected of gross misdemeanors.

Carried away by an impulse of gratitude he came very near disclosing all that he had thought of him, and asking pardon for having taken him to be an associate of Fil-de-Soie.

If he did not make this confession, it was because he was restrained by a laudable scruple; it would have led them to talk of the Court of Assizes, of the upholsterer and of the Baroness.

He was reluctant to approach this subject, now that he had begun to believe in the innocence of Mme. de Noyal.

He limited himself, therefore, to the expression of the wish that he might soon again see

his deliverer, to telling his own name, and asking his, which he was supposed not to know. M. de Chenerailles responded to these overtures by handing his card to Robert and saying that he would come the next day to hear how he was. To which du Plessis replied that it was his place to go to thank him. This exchange of courtesies made up the conversation during the journey, which was not a long one, for the marquis' horse went like the wind.

These gentlemen seemed to be agreed not to go beyond polite trifles and, no doubt, each had his reasons for holding himself on his guard.

When the carriage stopped in front of Robert's house, the marquis alighted first, rang the bell and carried his consideration so far as to offer his arm to Robert to go up the stairs. But as he had no further need of assistance, he refused this obliging offer and they separated after exchanging a shake of the hand.

"All is well that ends well," says the proverb,

and the evening which had begun so badly, could not have ended better.

On entering his apartment, a comfortable entresol, Robert experienced the satisfaction of a hunter who finds a good lodging after the emotions and fatigues of a long chase. His servant was waiting for him. He sent him away and was not long in getting to bed; but sleep did not come at once. The scenes through which he had passed came back like a dream. A bad dream too, for they recalled the memory of Jeanne Cariste whom he had loved.

He thought also of his future relations with Mme. de Noyal. He certainly owed her a visit, and he resolved to tell her what this juror whom she did not know, had done for her, and whom he now reproached himself for having so inconsiderately suspected.

This done he would resume his accustomed course, and would soon forget the gloomy drama, which, as he believed, had closed with

the acquittal of Mme. de Noyal. He did not suspect that the drama was just beginning and that he should see many others grow out of this.

CHAPTER III.

Six months have passed.

The criminal trial which filled the public mind at the close of the last autumn has taken its place among celebrated cases, but the heroine of this judicial drama is no longer remembered. It is always so in Paris, where the present dominates everything. It is only in the provinces that they know how to remember. Mme. de Noyal does not complain that she is forgotten, and she has done what she could to effect this. The day after the verdict she went to Pisa to spend the winter, where she only met hurried tourists and English invalids. In the spring she returned to France and secluded herself in her villa at Chatenay near Sceaux, where she now lives.

During her voluntary exile in Italy she gave no sign of life to any one but Robert du Plessis, and the first letter she wrote to him was a

master-piece. She found the exact terms in which to declare her innocence and wrote that she had suffered less from the iniquitous charge than from the frightful death of her young cousin Jeanne Caristie.

Robert began by doubting the innocence of the Baroness, but he was convinced of it at the end. This letter touched him and he answered it. The correspondence was continued and since the return of Mme. de Noyal he has visited her assiduously at her country house where she receives no one else.

Robert thinks no more of his first mistress than he does of the ancient Odyssey, and the chimeras which he conjured up, after these adventures, have ceased to haunt his mind.

He has exchanged one visit with M. de Chenerailles, but they have formed no ties. They salute when they meet in the Bois or at the theatre, but they have never yet met in any parlor or club room.

And Robert knows no more of this gentleman than he knew on the day when he made his acquaintance. He is still limited to the very summary information of the upholsterer and the artist Cadornac.

He has never since entered the Moulin-Rouge and it was not there that he again saw Fil-de-Soie. It was under the colonnade of the Bourse, that he saw him passing from group to group with note-book and pencil in his hand. Fil-de-Soie has become a broker. All roads lead to Rome. He does not dance "the guillotine step by persuasion" any longer. The Goulue weeps for her favorite cavalier.

When Robert sometimes recalls the incidents which preceded and followed the informal quadrille one evening in November, he concludes that he was deceived in thinking he saw on the Quay de l' Horologe, M. de Chenerailles who came to his rescue in so timely a manner at the corner of the Cite Gaillard.

Fil-de-Soie, too, does not remember that he sat beside him on the imperial of the omnibus, for he never looks at him when he comes across him at the Bourse, where Robert goes every day.

Urged by his friend Raoul Vignemale, Robert speculates in stocks and as he commenced by making money, he has acquired a taste for the game, which is infinitely more dangerous than baccarat. But he was caught in the decline, which came quickly; he loses every day and he has not the resolution to stop.

Then, in order to console himself, or rather to divert his thoughts, as soon as the bell announces the close of operations, Robert hastens to Chatenay. He finds no pleasure anywhere else, and instead of spending his Sundays at the club as formerly, he passes them all at Chatenay.

His friends wonder why he has changed his mode of life. Some believe that he is ruined; others suspect him of being in love.

They are mistaken. Robert is not in love yet, but it is not impossible that he may soon be in that condition, for he does not perceive the perils which threaten his heart and his fortune.

He always hopes that the next settlement will restore what he has lost. The only woman whom he ever wished to marry is dead, and he does not dream of engaging himself to another either from a good motive or a bad one.

He goes to Chatenay every day to talk of the one he loved. He talks sometimes of the accusation which has unsettled the life of Mme. de Noyal; but Jeanne Caristie's name is often spoken in their conversations, and the Baroness never speaks it without her eyes filling with tears.

Robert has confessed to her that he had a tender feeling for Mlle. Caristie and Mme. de Noyal has gently reproached him for not having declared himself. He has also told her about the chief of the jury who brought about

her acquittal, and without telling her how he became acquainted with him, he asked if she would like to have him presented to her. She declined the proposal and seemed only moderately touched by the service which M. de Chenerailles had rendered her.

Robert soon found that this was not an agreeable subject for the Baroness and did not again refer to it.

She prefers to hear him talk of the fetes which she used to give in her hotel in the Rue Murillo, of the cotillions which she led so grandly, and of the cavalcades when, in fine weather, he rode by her side in the pretty woods of Verrieres.

There is no one but him to recall these happy days to her, for the people whom she used to entertain do not know that she is at her villa of Chatenay. Her old servants left her when she was arrested, and she has taken back only one woman—the woman who was Jeanne's governess and who was a witness at

the trial. She testified, however, only to insignificant facts, for she was not at Chatenay on the day of the crime.

The Baroness brought a lady's maid and a footman with her from Italy. These know nothing of the past, except what they have learned from the inhabitants of the village of Chatenay. The cook came from an intelligence office and the garden is taken care of by a man who does not lodge at the villa.

Mme. de Noyal has all new servants and she is wise, since she is going to begin a new life. Retirement, silence and oblivion are necessary for her. Robert approves this and Robert suffices, if not to console her, at least to distract her mind from her troubles. She lives without any plans for she knows that women struggle and that God leads them.

Robert, who is as much of a fatalist as she, lets himself go with the current of the new existence without asking whither it is carrying them both.

CHAPTER IV.

They were still at the same point, when, on the first Sunday of the month of May, Robert du Plessis arrived at the gate of Rose Villa. Winter and neglect had killed the rose-bushes, but the name remained in golden letters on the pediment of the door. Robert had walked from the station and the way had seemed short. The chestnuts were about to bloom, the lilacs were in flower, and the birds were singing in the tall trees. The April settlement had not been bad and Robert, free from the cares which often disturbed him at the end of the month, enjoyed to the full this marvelous spring day which he intended to spend with Mme. de Noyal.

He did not take the trouble to ring, for he knew that the porter's lodge was vacant. He pushed on the half-open gate and entering thought of the time when brilliant equipages

brought the invited guests to the chateau. Now there were no liveried lackeys to wait for them at the foot of the perron; no Percheron horses to bring them from the station. The Baroness sold her horses and carriages, when she discharged her servants. The stables and coach-houses are empty.

Mme. de Noyal understands that the Villa of Roses, stained by crime, cannot be opened for fetes and Robert du Plessis approves her conduct, for it shows that she has some heart and spirit.

Robert was accustomed to go through the gate without being announced, to cross the principal court, and to enter at the ground floor of the villa, where he usually found someone to speak to: sometimes the footman—a stiff and silent Englishman—but oftener the waiting-maid—a wily Parisian whom the Baroness had engaged in Pisa, where she had been left by a ruined prima donna.

Today there was no one in the antechamber. Robert was on a footing, in the house of Mme. de Noyal, that justified him in entering unannounced, and he went on to a small parlor which was her favorite sitting-room. She was not there. She knew, however, that he would come, and she never awaited him in the garden, which recalled such lugubrious memories. Where could she be? Robert passed into another room and did not find a single person.

"This is the castle of the Sleeping Beauty," he murmured, wondering if he should go up to the first floor.

A door, which he had not noticed, was now opened, and a woman entered without any noise, a woman dressed in black, who held a bunch of keys in her hand. He took her, at first, for a new domestic and was about to address her as such, when he recognized her.

It was the companion who had been with Mme. de Noyal for the past two months, the governess of Jeanne Caristie, whom she had

never left until the day when the unfortunate girl was killed by the ball of an assassin.

Robert had never been alone with her, and had never seen her so near, for before Jeanne's tragic death, she was very seldom seen. She did not go into society with Mme. de Noyal and her cousin, and on every occasion she kept herself in the background, affecting to dress herself like a sister in some poor convent, and trying to look old.

Robert had not yet observed that she was much younger than she wished to appear. To-day, for the first time, he saw her in a full light, and she looked at him without lowering her eyes; eyes that were deep, clear and sparkling, eyes that would make one forget the most severe ugliness.

Ugly she was not, although her skin lacked freshness. Her hair was of that color which was so dear to the great Venetian painters of the sixteenth century, almost red with golden

reflections. Her prominent chin indicated an iron will.

Robert did not comprehend why he had never before observed this characteristic face, and he asked himself: "Whom does she resemble?"

For she positively resembled some one whom he knew. He was sure of it. But whom? It was not the Baroness, who was a blonde with a complexion of lily and rose; still less the poor dead girl, who had the pure features and sweet look of a Madonna of Raphael. The outline, and above all, the expression of the face recalled a remembrance which he could not succeed in fixing precisely.

He saluted her politely and was about to ask her where he could find Mme. de Noyal.

She had evidently anticipated the question, for she said:

"Angelique is out on the Versailles road."

This familiarity of language did not shock Robert, for he remembered to have heard her

call the Baroness by her first name, having known her when she was quite young.

She added: "That is the road to the cemetery of Chatenay. Angelique goes there very often to put flowers on the tomb of the friend whom we have lost. You knew it, did you not?"

"No," stammered Robert, affected and a little surprised. "Mme. de Noyal has never told me."

"She was afraid of making you sad. She will be back soon by the little gate at the end of the park. If you take the path which runs around the lake, you can not fail to meet her. She will be very happy to see you."

Robert did not take his eyes from the woman while she was talking, and she not only did not seem to be astonished to be gazed at in that way, but to be pleased with it. Her eyes seemed to be saying: "How do you like me?" And there was a satisfied smile on her sensual lips, as if she were thinking, "Have you never before perceived that I am a woman also?"

It was he who put an end to this mutual examination.

"I thank you, madame, for telling me," he said, turning towards a French window which opened into the garden, "and I am going."——

"Not madame, if you please," interrupted the ex-governess. "I am a single woman, that is ridiculous at my age—Angelique has been married ten years, and I am six years older than she—but I am not complaining of my fate—she has suffered more than I have."

Robert was almost tempted to respond by a compliment, which she, perhaps, was expecting. He contented himself, however, with bowing an expression of his sympathetic approbation, and the demoiselle continued:

"I know it, for I have been with her ever since her widowhood, and I hope I may never have to leave her; for if she takes my advice she will never marry again."

"She is very young to remain a widow always," said Robert, smiling, very much astonished at

words so much out of place in the mouth of a person, who, although not to be confounded with the servants, was still in the service of the Baroness, and who coolly replied:

"Angelique is free to bind herself again, and I am free to separate from her if she should do so foolish a thing."

Robert had a great desire to say: "You do not need to keep your place then," but he was afraid of wounding her self-esteem and he cut short the tete-a-tete by taking leave of her with as much ceremony as if she had been the chatelaine of Rose Villa. He went down into the garden and, in going along the path which she had indicated, he felt that she was following him with her eyes, but he was careful not to look around to assure himself.

He distrusted this woman without knowing why. He had never noticed her before the death of Jeanne Caristie, for he had seldom seen her. Now she seemed to have renounced the part she had played so long in the house of

Mme. de Noyal, The caterpillar had become a butterfly and had opened its wings, not yet in the broad sunlight, but in the semi-darkness of the twilight, as was suitable to the modest position which she occupied at the chateau.

She had made a singular impression upon him, and everything about her was strange, even to the sound of her voice which was grave and sonorous, with occasional caressing inflections.

She did not please him, but she excited his curiosity like an enigma which he would like to solve. And he could not get rid of the idea that she resembled some one whom he knew.

The garden which he had to cross in order to meet Mme. de Noyal was almost a park, for in the space inclosed by the walls were long lawns separated by numerous clusters of full-grown trees.

There was an artificial stream and a small lake, limpid and deep, whose steep banks were shaded by enormous willows.

Robert du Plessis was familiar with this park for he had been through it more than once when Mme. de Noyal gave her fetes. Since her return she very rarely walked out, and when she did walk with him she kept near to the chateau. He continued to follow the paths indicated by the companion and, at last, at the end of a badly kept path, he perceived the small door that he was looking for.

It was almost concealed by the stems of an ivy which covered the walls of the inclosure, which was cut near there by a grating through which the guests at the villa could see the pedestrians and carriages on the road from Choisy-le-Roi to Versailles, which was always much frequented, especially on Sundays. Inside, on a mound of grass which commanded this grated opening, was a bench which had been placed there for the use of those who wished to rest, while amusing themselves with the gratuitous spectacle of the people out for a holiday.

Robert had no thought of indulging in this diversion so highly appreciated by the Parisian. He longed to find Mme. de Noyal, first, for the pleasure of seeing her, and also because he wished to talk with her about this woman whose name even he did not know.

He was not very far from the ivy-wreathed door, when, having arrived at the end of a hedge which bordered the path, he saw Mme. de Noyal within ten steps of him—she was sitting on a two-seated bench which had been placed there for the convenience of guests.

She had not stopped there to watch the passers-by, for her back was turned toward the road, but her head was bent so that Robert only recognized her by her form and the mourning which she had worn since the death of her cousin.

She raised her head at the sound of his steps and was about to rise to meet him but he prevented her.

"I have come to find you," he said, taking a seat beside her.

"You could not have expected to find me here, however," murmured the Baroness, visibly annoyed at having been surprised.

"No—but I knew where you had gone."

"How did you know it?"

"Your servants were not in when I arrived. I permitted myself to enter, and in the little parlor where you usually receive me, I met—a lady—."

"Severine?"

"Ah!" cried Robert gaily, "that is the name which I did not remember any better than I did the person who bears it. I do not know why I had forgotten it."

"The name or the person?" asked Mme. de Noyal quickly.

"Oh! the person. I recollected that I had seen her at your house, but the name had entirely escaped from my memory—although it is not a common one."

"That is not exactly her name. She is really named Severe."

"Then she is very well named, for she does not seem to be very sweet."

"It is the name of a saint who is very much venerated in Berry, where Mlle. Dahun was born."

"Really, she is a demoiselle then," said Robert laughing. "It is the fate of governesses to be old maids."

"She is not a governess any longer, and it is her own fault if she is not married, for she has money."

"Really? Why has she waited so long then?"

"Because she has not always been rich. But I do not believe she has taken a vow to remain single, and she could find a husband without any trouble."

"That is the blessing I should wish for her. Has she inherited a fortune?"

"Not that I know of. She has saved money from her salary, and in fifteen years she has had time to put by enough to make quite a dowry. But I presume that you have not come here to talk about her," said Mme. de Noyal, dryly.

"Certainly not!" cried Robert. I pray you to believe that Mlle. Severne's history interests me very little indeed. I have come, as always, to see you only, and I promise myself the pleasure of passing some hours in your society."

"I have nothing more agreeable to tell you than that, very probably, I shall shorten my stay at Chatenay."

"Do you think of going back to Paris? I should be delighted, for—"

"I shall never live in Paris again; I think of leaving France forever."

"Expatriate yourself! I could have understood that six months ago—your journey to Italy was easily explained—but now that that

unfortunate trial is forgotten, why do you not remain here?"

"Because it is not living to live as I do—alone in the memory of the awful crime which was committed before my very eyes. You have not abandoned me, and I am grateful to you, but my situation is intolerable, for it is horribly false—even in relation to you."

"In what way, I pray?"

"You are only my friend, and neither you nor I are at an age when a man can remain the friend of a woman without the world's finding fault with it."

"The world does not think anything about us—and even if it should—"

"You are not afraid to brave it. I have not the courage, and I am not strong enough to endure humiliation any longer."

"What do you mean? Humiliation? How?"

"I endure it every day."

"From whom? You see no one but me, and

I suppose that your servants do not presume—"

"No, not yet—but the people whom I meet when I go out make me feel cruelly that nothing ever effaces the stain of an accusation, even though it be an unjust one. Some persons go out of their way to avoid me: others, tradesmen whom I have enriched, salute me with an ironical affectation, and just now I was insulted, not far from here—some rascals, whom I had never seen, sneered as they spoke my name."

"How did they know it? You must be mistaken."

"No, I heard it plainly—there! they are beginning again. Listen!"

"They are singing," said Robert, as he heard some words bawled to a silly air, from the other side of the Park wall.

He recognized an old song of the concert-saloon which began thus:

In the rue Lique-Liquetowne"
There lives a grocer—"

It was stupid but not malicious, and it was impossible to find anything insulting in it—not even an allusion to Mme. de Noyal.

"It is a band of students or clerks out for a holiday," said du Plessis who thought the sensitiveness of the chatelaine a little ridiculous.

The two idiotic lines were repeated in chorus, and the soloist took up the next two lines:

"Who has a daughter Angelique
Lique-Lique to marry off."

This time it was the christian name of Mme. de Noyal which came from the drunken mouth of this virtuoso of the highway, but surely it was not addressed to her. Robert said this to her and she replied dryly.

"I am sure the song is addressed to me, and they have chosen it expressly to insult me. Do you hear the refrain?"

It sounded like a fanfare as it was bellowed out by the same brazen voice:

"I wish my daughter to be a Baroness—
Or a danseuse—that is my *tic*."

and the singer forced the note on the word baroness.

Was there any design in this? Robert did not think so, but he was angry that some drunken men should take the liberty to give a serenade, which resembled a charivari, to the proprietress of the villa, and he rose to go and put a stop to it.

The Baroness had already risen and was at some distance from the bench, when the singers, who had been hidden by the wall, appeared in front of the grating.

There were six or seven of them, of whom three were women, in the loud toilettes of the Latin quarter. The men, who were quite young and more correctly dressed than their companions, were getting ready to go on with the concert.

Robert who had gone to order them away, was not a little surprised to see that the leader of this jolly and noisy troupe—recognizable by his cane, which he held at arm's length like the

leader of an orchestra—was Fil-de-Soie. Fil-de-Soie in a new phase—dressed in the latest fashion of the society in which he had lived since his metamorphosis, and so changed that his friends of the Moulin-Rouge, would have taken him for a solid man, perhaps.

Robert, who saw him every day under the colonnade of the Bourse, could not be mistaken, and he was just opening his mouth to interrupt him sharply, when Fil-de-Soie, instead of giving the signal for a renewal of the song, ordered: "File to the left! forward, march!" executed a twirl with his cane like a veritable drum-major, and put himself at the head of the column which followed him closely one behind the other.

These rural monomaniacs filed the length of the wall and disappeared, to the great astonishment of Robert du Plessis who had expected to have a quarrel with the black-guards. It was inexplicable, but Robert did not amuse himself in trying to find out why they took

flight as soon as he showed himself. He hastened to rejoin Mme. de Noyal that he might reassure her, and it did not take him long to overtake her, for she had walked slowly.

"Well!" said he gaily, "we are rid of them. They were easily managed, for they decamped as soon as they saw me."

"They will return," said the Baroness, "or some others will come. It is an organized persecution to force me to leave the country and I have decided to do it."

"What! you will leave this charming villa because you hear some drunken fellows singing on a public road! That is one of the inconveniences of proximity to Paris, and there is no proof that these brawlers wished to annoy you."

"There is no proof, I know, but I feel sure of it."

"Do you suppose that they are hired to frighten you?"

"I am convinced of it."

"Good God, by whom?"

"By my enemies."

"Have you any enemies?"

"Do you doubt it?"

"No, not since you say so—but I also know that you have a friend to protect you."

"Are you the friend?"

"You know it perfectly well."

"Yes, you have proved, by coming to visit me in my solitude, that you are not among those who persist in accusing me of an infamous crime."

"They would not dare to accuse you in my presence. If any one should dare to do so—"

"What would you do?"

"I would shoot him," said du Plessis, simply."

"By what right? you are neither my husband nor my brother."

"By the right of a gallant man to protect a woman from insult."

"And you would fight a duel to prove that I am innocent! You see that I shall have to go away—if only to prevent you from risking your life—I do not wish to bring misfortune upon all who love me. When I shall be far away from France I shall no longer be talked about—and you will forget me."

"I forget you! I would like to, but I cannot, and if you are resolved to exile yourself——"

"Well?"

"I will follow you."

"Would you leave Paris?"

"Yes, for all the good it is to me."

"If I should presume to take you at your word, it would not be long before you would repent of a folly which would cause your unhappiness—and mine."

"Yours? You have a sad opinion of me."

"On the contrary, I think well of you. I think you are quite capable of an impulsive act and even an inconsiderate one—but I do

not wish to put your constancy to the proof."

"And if I should tell you that I love you," cried Robert carried away by the situation.

"I should ask you since when?" replied the Baroness ironically.

"Ever since I knew you."

"I should not believe you, for you began by lying—you knew me when you fell in love with Jeanne."

"That is true—I have told you so—she pleased me very much, and for a moment, I dreamed of marrying her—but I believe that she did not care for me."

"You are mistaken. She loved you."

"What! did she tell you so?"

"No, she did not tell me, but three days before her death she told Severine, who unfortunately kept the secret."

"Why, unfortunately?"

"Because if Severine had confided in me, I would not have concealed it from you, and you

would have married. She loved you very much—and it was the cause of her death."

"How? What had that to do with it?"

"Did you never wonder who killed her? Has it never occurred to you that this murder was caused by passion?"

"Perhaps, but what passion could have urged the assassin?"

"The most violent of all passions—jealousy."

Robert was not expecting this reply. The prosecution had not dared, from lack of proof, to assert that the accused was jealous of her cousin, but had allowed it to be inferred; and Mme. de Noyal who had energetically protested against this supposition, now declared that jealousy had been the motive of the crime.

"Yes, jealousy," she persisted. "Jeanne was killed by a man who was persecuting her by his declarations of love, and she refused to listen to him."

"You knew that, and you did not speak!"

"I did not know it when I was arrested—and if I had known it, I would not have told it for I should have been obliged to tell, that although Jeanne avoided him, she did not denounce him, either to me or to her governess. Some persons who were not called to testify, had seen him wandering around the villa, and after the crime, he was never seen in the country again. Severine does not doubt that he murdered her because she had told him that he must cease his persecutions."

"We must believe then that she permitted him to speak to her, when he met her alone?"

"Alas! yes, and that is the reason why, even if I had known all this at that time, I would not, to save my own life, have permitted a shadow of suspicion to fall on the conduct of our dear, dead girl. She was only imprudent, and she has paid for it with her life."

These tardy confidences surprised Robert very much, but he believed them to be sincere, and the sentiments expressed by Mme. de

Noyal touched him deeply. He pitied her and he admired her.

They were walking, side by side, along a path bordered on the left by a thick hedge.

Suddenly, Mme. de Noyal stopped and Robert saw that she was trembling.

"What is the matter, madame?" he asked hastening to support her.

"This is the place," she murmured.

Robert understood that they had reached the place where the crime was committed and for a moment he was greatly affected.

The Baroness, leaning on his arm, continued in an unsteady voice:

"Pardon my weakness—I can never pass this fatal spot without my heart failing—but I do not regret coming this way with you, for you can realize the horrible scene. I was walking at the right of Jeanne, who almost touched this hedge—it was growing late and we were intending to return to the house after going around the lake. Jeanne was very gay. She

was talking of you, and I have since thought that she was going to confess that she loved you when she was struck—I saw a flame—I heard a report—Jeanne fell without a cry—and then—I was a coward—I ran away."

"You are quite excusable for having lost your presence of mind."

"No! I ought to have helped Jeanne, and I left her and ran away from the assassin."

"That was very fortunate! If you had pursued him he would have killed you."

"Ah well! I should not have suffered the shame of being accused—judged—and acquitted by miracle. I live, but my life is broken—I would rather have died."

"Do not talk so, I beg of you. You have suffered cruelly, but the future remains to you."

"The future! It will not bring forgetfulness, it will only bring isolation and neglect."

"No, for I am yours—you know it well—yours forever."

"Do you mean that you will follow me if I leave France?"

"I have already said so, and I will not unsay it."

"That would be a sacrifice on your part which I would not accept."

"A sacrifice which would cost me very little, for I am tired of the life I am leading in Paris. It would cost me very much more to give up seeing you, and if you allow me to accompany you, I shall only ask time enough to arrange my affairs, which, I confess, are in a somewhat embarrassed condition."

"They are, perhaps, less so than mine," said Mme. de Noyal sadly shaking her head.

This response surprised Robert. He had supposed the Baroness to be very rich. This, indeed, was one of the reasons which had prevented him from aspiring to her hand—for he was not a fortune-hunter.

"Yes," she continued, "I have for a long time, spent without any calculation, and while

others have grown rich at my expense, I am impoverished. But it does not matter. When I have sold my property, I shall have enough to live on abroad."

"So shall I, I hope, when I have settled my operations at the Bourse."

"Then you are serious when you offer to exile yourself with me?"

"Very serious indeed, I swear it to you."

Robert had no sooner pronounced this oath, than the Baroness disengaged herself from him and turned to look over the hedge.

"What is there?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said after a short silence; "I thought I heard some one walking behind the hedge—I was mistaken—I am nervous. I have grown very timid since I saw my unhappy cousin fall at my feet and I tremble at the slightest sound."

"I understand that. Would you like me to go to the end of the green walk to assure myself that it does not conceal some one?"

"No, it is unnecessary. When I came in I was careful to double-lock the door."

"Was it open on the day the assassin slipped in?"

"No, I have always thought that he came in through the large gate."

"With the connivance of your servants, perhaps?"

"Or by taking advantage of their negligence. I was very badly served, and it is not much better now. But let us not talk of that any more and come back to my projects of departure. My resolve is irrevocable, and you have just sworn that you are decided to go with me —I would like very much to believe this oath —which I did not ask of you—you will keep it, but, after?"

'How, after?"

"Yes, to what will our voluntary exile lead us?"

Robert, embarrassed by this question thus thrust into his face, only responded by an

equivocal smile, and the Baroness, coldly continued.

"You spoke to me just now of the future—have you ever asked yourself what it would be for me if we were—why should I not call things by their right names?—if you were my lover and I your mistress?"

"I should consider myself too happy," murmured du Plessis, a little foolishly.

"I should be the most unhappy of women," replied Mme. de Noyal quickly, "for after the unmerited fall which I have experienced, I will never resign myself to being put aside by the world in which I have always lived, and my only chance of re-entering it with my head up is to meet an honest man who loves me enough to marry me."

The boot was small, but he would have had trouble to evade putting it on. He did not even dream of doing so.

In coming to pass Sundays at Rose Villa, Robert had certainly not foreseen that the

Baroness whom he liked very much, would suddenly raise the grave question of marriage; and if he had, he very probably would have prepared to defend himself, but like a jockey at a steeple-chase, who finds himself suddenly confronted by an obstacle not down on the programme, he had nothing else to do but to leap, under penalty of being unhorsed by stopping his horse too suddenly.

He did not hesitate to leap the ditch at the risk of his future happiness and present independence.

"Well, it depends only on you. I flatter myself that I am the man you are seeking. If you wish, we will start in a fortnight; we will be married at Venice, and when we return to Paris I shall have the right to protect you against everybody."

This was said so simply that Mme. de Noyal, excited almost to tears, scarcely had the strength to murmur:

"You are a noble man."

"Then you accept," replied Robert gaily, kissing her hand. "Good, we are engaged—we have nothing more to do but—"

A noise of crushed leaves interrupted his words, and the Baroness, quite pale, pressed timidly against him.

There was some one behind the hedge listening to them.

"Decidedly, I believe this time that there is some one watching us. I will be sure of it," cried Robert, seizing the branches of the hedge in order to separate them.

The song of a bird arrested him. A blackbird flew away with a great rustling of wings and a burst of song.

Robert laughed aloud, and the Baroness was satisfied.

The talk, which had been so serious in the beginning, was growing tender, when Mme. de Noyal saw her footman coming toward her with a folded paper in his hand.

"A little blue (*petit bleu*) for you," said Robert.

"I am not expecting one from anybody," said the Baroness, a little anxiously.

It was really a dispatch, but instead of handing it to Mme. de Noyal, the servant hastened to give it to M. du Plessis, and immediately took his way back to the villa. Robert, who was surprised at receiving a telegram at Chatenay, examined it and did not hurry to open it.

"Read it, my friend," said the Baroness gently. "I suppose that my presence does not disturb you."

"Not at all. I can not guess who knows of my being here, but I have no secrets from you." And he tore open the blue envelope.

"Is there bad news ?" asked Mme. de Noyal, seeing that he frowned.

"I do not know; it is not at all clear," responded Robert with ill-humor. "Listen, and tell me if you understand this negro jargon:"

"*Hasten; dare, dare. Wait you station, five o'clock. Sure not miss train. If missed, we go up.*"

Itwascorrectly addressed, "Robert du Plessis, care Mme. the Baroness de Noyal, Rose Villa, Chatenay."

"There is nothing intelligible in this nonsensical dispatch, but the address and the signature: "RAOUL VIGNEMALE."

"He is one of your friends, I believe?" asked the Baroness.

"Yes, you are not acquainted with him, but I must have spoken to you about him."

"You told him then that you were going to spend the day with me?"

"No, and I cannot imagine how he found it out."

"That is strange, to be sure, but why does he recall you to Paris in such haste?"

"The deuce if I know!"

"He says that if you miss the train you will *go up*. What does he mean by those words?"

"It is all Hebrew to me."

"Did you not say that this gentleman has done some business with you?"

"Yes, and what I have done with him has not been successful."

"It seems to me that in the argot which they speak at the Exchange, *go up* means to lose all one's money."

"Perfectly! but just now I have nothing to fear, for I settled day before yesterday, unless Vignemale has involved me in some new operation without letting me know."

"Whatever it may be, you can not rest in uncertainty. Go, my friend! go at once! the train leaves Sceaux at thirty-four minutes past four—you have no time to lose."

"To the devil, with Vignemale and business! I came to Chatenay to see you. I am here and I am going to stay here."

"I beg of you to go. I should reproach myself all my life, if by keeping you here, I should

be the cause of a disaster which might compromise your fortune—and if you staid in spite of my prayer, I should be so worried that I should not talk of anything else—we should pass a very gloomy day—it would be a hundred times better for you to come back tomorrow, when you have seen your friend and prevented the catastrophe which threatens you."

Robert began to think this would be wiser. He did not suspect Vignemale's honesty; he believed him incapable of using his name in any wild scheme, but he distrusted the impulses of this bold fellow who thought only of colossal speculations and who always predicted a rise in stocks.

With a partner of this stamp, any bad news coming suddenly on the market might ruin the firm in twenty-four hours.

There was then the pressure of necessity, and it would have been foolish in him to lose the chance which still remained of averting

disaster. If Robert had received this alarming telegram the evening before, he would not have hesitated a minute; but now it would cost something to leave this charming widow to whom he had just engaged himself.

"Do you really wish it," he asked.

"I insist upon it."

"You have the right, for I belong to you. Only promise me that you will receive me to-morrow morning."

"As early as you please."

"Then I will go, and I will return by the first train. Will you not be afraid to stay alone to-night so near to the park where one hears steps behind the hedges?" asked Robert du Plessis. He smiled at the remembrance, but Mme. de Noyal grew pale, and Robert felt her hand tremble in his.

"I will not walk in the accursed park any more without you," murmured the Baroness, as she pressed close to his side.

"I hope so, surely!" he cried gaily. "I do not believe there is any danger; but there are too many little doors, and the highway is too near the wall. The suburbs of Paris are very lively, but there are too many bad fellows about, especially on Sunday, and you would do well not to sit on that bench in front of the grating."

"I will be sure not to do so. I am too much afraid of that wicked band—I am going this way to see my poor rose-bushes which were frozen in the winter. But do not delay, I pray you. I shall be in despair, if you miss your friend, and I shall not be easy until I see you again. Good-by till to-morrow. Think of me, and promise me that you will not play any more."

"I might answer: I swear I will not! but I do not wish to make too many promises. I will keep the one I had just made when that meddlesome *petit bleu* disturbed us."

"I have a presentiment that it will save you from disaster, for you will get there in time," said the Baroness after looking at her watch. "Will you, before you cross the court, ask Severine to come to me? I wish to speak to her."

"Do you think that I shall meet her?" asked Robert a little surprised at the commission.

"She is, no doubt, in the small parlor on the ground-floor, sitting near the open window. She spends every day in writing."

"What is she writing? Her memoires?'

"Perhaps," gaily responded Mme. de Noyal. "Do not take the trouble to go up the perron. The window of the parlor is on a level with the path. You will see Mlle. Dahun bending over her desk; you will tell her that I want her, and she will be willing to defer her writing, I trust."

"I understand—I will send her to you."

"If, by chance, she has gone out, do not lose any time in looking for her. She would be in

the garden, and I shall find her there. Go, my friend. Time is passing and trains do not wait."

"I am off," said Robert, taking his course towards the city, while Mme. de Noyal walked slowly towards her rose garden which lay on the other side of the park.

Robert, with that mobility of spirit which was the least of his faults, was now anxious to join his friend Vignemale as soon as possible, and would gladly have been excused from going out of his way to inform the companion that the Baroness was expecting her.

He found the window open, but he saw only an empty arm-chair in front of a large desk laden with books and papers. Fatigued, no doubt, with directing letters or regulating accounts, Mlle. Severine had left the place, and Robert was about to go on his way when he caught sight of a portrait which hung opposite the window.

The sun fell directly upon it, and dazzled the eye so that all he could at first distinguish was a name, engraved in black letters on the moulding at the bottom of the gold frame: a name and a date

"P. Cadornac—1889."

The name of the painter and the date of the exposition where the picture had been exhibited.

Robert's curiosity was piqued, for he had hardly expected to find there a work of his friend, the artist of Montmartre.

The picture was the portrait of a man and Robert, by changing his position and making a shade with his hands, was, at last, able to examine the face without being blinded by the dazzling reflections.

He recognized immediately the man who had sat for the portrait. It was M. de Chenerailles.

Robert could scarcely believe his eyes. Cadornac had spoken to him, on the evening in

November, of this portrait for which he had been so royally paid by the Marquis. But how came this work of art to ornament the little parlor, or rather the office, of Mlle. Severine Dahun? Was the governess a relation or the mistress of this lord more or less genuine?

While Robert was asking himself these questions, his memory suddenly awoke.

"There it is, parbleu! there is the likeness I was searching for," said he between his teeth. "The features are not the same; but the look of the face and the expression of the eye are alike. It is striking, and I wonder that the idea of comparing the two heads did not come to me before. True, I had not had the chance. Now that I have seen Chenerailles in a painting, since talking with Severine, I am sure they have the same blood in their veins. They do not seem to be trying to hide themselves, since this sort of governess hangs the portrait of the Marquis in her own room.

"I wonder how nearly they are related! If they were brother and sister, the Dahun, who is—or says she is—an unmarried woman, would be called Chenerailles like the Marquis—unless the latter gives himself a name which does not belong to him—which would not surprise me. Mme. de Noyal must know all about the family of her governess. She will tell me to-morrow.

"Now," said Robert, turning on his heel with the carelessness which formed the basis of his character, "I must try to catch the train."

He did not miss it. Sceaux is not far from Chatenay and he had a good pair of legs. He arrived five minutes before the hour of departure, and leaped into an empty compartment, raging against the telegram which had recalled him to Paris.

But he was really very uneasy. He suspected some financial disaster which might ruin him, and he was grateful to Vignemale for

having warned him, although he only understood that some danger threatened, which there was still time to avert.

Temporarily relieved by a gleam of reflection, Robert resolved that this should be a lesson and that he would give up this infernal gambling on the Bourse, which had always caused him disagreeable emotions.

Besides he could do nothing else since he had decided to leave Paris and to return a married man.

He had sworn, and he intended to keep his word; but he knew—and Mme. de Noyal also knew—that one can not be married off-hand in France. There are long formalities to be gone through and the engaged couple would have plenty of time to reflect before taking the irrevocable step.

But, during the short journey from Sceaux to Paris, Robert thought much less of the conjugal future which awaited him than of the threatening news that he should hear on leaving the train.

CHAPTER V.

There were not many passengers on the five o'clock train. The Sunday excursionists like to dine in the country and the first class carriages were nearly empty.

On reaching the end of his journey, Robert looked for Vignemale. There were not ten persons in the waiting-room and Vignemale was not among them.

The train was five minutes late and he could not have left the station, but he might be behind time. The station is at a considerable distance from the grand boulevards, and the cabs are slow. Robert waited. He sat down on the highest step of the staircase so that he might be able to see Vignemale as soon as he entered the court in a victoria drawn by some broken-winded horse. He only saw some marauding coachmen moving about in search of a passenger.

Ten minutes passed. Robert stamped his feet with impatience, and his mind was filled with the most incoherent conjectures.

What was the reason that Vignemale failed to be at the place appointed by the dispatch? Was he to think that the disaster which he wished to prevent had been consummated and that the poor fellow had not dared to bring the news of this misfortune?

"I know him—the animal," muttered du Plessis; "he is risky in business affairs, but he is not dishonest. If he has done me the bad turn to ruin me, he is quite capable of blowing out his brains. I should be in a pretty fix. But what unlucky operation could he have got me into, since I left him yesterday at three o'clock? It must have been in the evening at the sub-exchange (*petite Bourse*). What has happened since then? There were no hints of a ministerial crisis this morning, and there was no talk of any trouble with Germany. It is impossible!"

A man came in calling out the evening papers. Robert bought them and looked in vain for any financial or political event.

Still Vignemale did not come.

Robert, exasperated, had half a mind to return to Sceaux by the next train, and perhaps it would have been well if he had done so; but he was carried away by anger.

"I will find him," said he between his teeth. "He shall explain his conduct to me. There are limits to friendship. If he has played a trick on me, he shall pay dearly for it."

Without further deliberation, Robert hailed a cab which was passing, and jumped into it saying: "Rue de Provence, No. 36." He did not expect to find Raoul at home, but he hoped to learn there where he might be found. For a wonder, the cab made very good time, and twenty minutes later he was at the Rou Drouet.

The broker's offices are in this street, and

the idea came to Robert to inquire, in passing, if any one had seen Vignemale.

It was Sunday; but the evening before a settlement the employes have work to do and Robert perceived, under the porte cochere, the old cashier whom he knew. He called him.

The good man smiled when du Plessis asked if Vignemale were there, though he took pains to add:

"Oh! I know very well that he is not usually in his office on holidays—but I understand that there is a report of news from—Egypt."

He said "Egypt," at a venture, as he might have said the Balearic Islands or any other place.

"Not that I know of," responded the cashier. "I have just seen the principal. He would have mentioned it. Decidedly quiet everywhere, monsieur. Everything is on the rise and to-morrow stocks will go off like milk porridge."

The adventure was becoming decidedly mysterious.

Relieved from a great anxiety, Robert breathed freely again; but he was not satisfied and he drove to the Rue Provence.

He began to wonder if he had interpreted the telegram correctly. The words "we will go up" might be understood in another way. They might refer to some affair which had nothing to do with business, and consequently to some matter in which Vignemale had need of the immediate assistance of his friend. They were intimate enough to justify his appeal to du Plessis in such a case.

It was, however, still to be explained why Vignemale had not gone to the station.

At the Rue de Provence, Robert learned that Vignemale had told the concierge that he was going to the club.

Now at the end of his conjectures, Robert concluded that his comrade was going to fight a duel and wanted seconds.

He knew that he was a bad fellow to deal with, and so there was nothing unreasonable in the supposition.

The club, of which they were both members, was within a step of the Boulevard des Capucines. Robert drove thither, and the first person that he saw on raising his eyes to the first floor, was Raoul Vignemale, leaning on the balcony railing and quietly smoking an enormous cigar.

"That is too much!" growled Robert as he jumped to the sidewalk after paying his fare. "My gentleman lounges here while I run after him. I do not know whether it is a duel, but he will have to settle with me first."

Vignemale saw him from his observatory and went through a joyous pantomime, raising his arms to heaven at the apparition of a friend whom he had not expected and with a superabundance of gestures invited him to come up. Robert needed no urging. He went up the broad stairs, four steps at a time, and

burst like a bomb-shell into the almost deserted parlor. Four men were playing whist in a corner of the room, and two or three old men were stretched out in rocking-chairs fast asleep. There was no other person on the balcony where Vignemale was taking the air.

"Here you are!" he cried, making room for du Plessis—"Parbleu! you have come in the nick of time! I was almost bored to death, and I was afraid I should have to dine with a lot of old gray-heads who fairly put me to sleep. We will charter a cab for a ride through the Bois, and then we will go to the Ambassadeurs or to the circus. How does that strike you?"

"I will tell you when you have explained why you sent for me to return to Paris."

"Well, that is cool! I could not very well write to you, not knowing where you were."

"You knew well enough to have the address perfectly right."

"Rose Villa, heigh?" asked Vignemale, winking his eye laughingly.

"Yes Rose Villa—and—"

"That is right, confess! You are so mysterious that you never have told me where you have been every Sunday for the last six weeks; and you will do me the justice to say that I have never asked you. But I guessed it, and I am not the only one. Your journeys to Chatenay are Punch's secret among us fellows on Change."

"That is not the question," interrupted Robert dryly. You telegraphed to me that you would meet me at five o'clock at the station, on the arrival of the train from Sceaux. I wish to know why you were not there."

"For the very simple reason that I did not make an appointment to meet you there."

"You dare to deny it?"

"I deny it absolutely."

Robert took the telegram from his pocket

and thrust it into the face of Vignemale, who asked without being at all excited:

"Who sent the *petit blue?*"

"You sent it. Will you deny your signature."

"I would not deny it if I should see it on the original of the dispatch, but a telegraphic signature means nothing. Some one has used my name, and I should like to know who. Let me examine that suspicious paper."

After looking it over Vignemale exclaimed.

"Did you believe that came from the office at Sceaux?"

"Naturally, I did."

"Did you see the messenger who brought it?"

"No, it was handed to me by a footman."

"Then I see through it. My dear fellow, this is a spurious telegram, and I am astonished that you were deceived. If you had examined it you would have noticed that the envelope is not stamped and that the dispatch was written by hand instead of being printed by the operator."

"That is so," murmured du Plessis, after he had verified it. "Some one must have stolen this blank from a telegraph office."

"Probably. And that is very easy. There are blanks always lying on the table where people write dispatches."

"But why did any one send me a false telegram?"

"To play a trick on you."

"But, who?"

"I had nothing to do with it, and that is all I know about it. But you will be sure to find the author of the joke some day."

"I do not see how."

"If I were in your place I should argue this way: It is May, so there is not an April fool. An ordinary joker would not have taken so much trouble for the sole pleasure of forcing me to take a useless journey. He had some object."

"I begin to think so; but what was it?"

"If you were a married man one might presume to think that some fine gentleman invented this trick to clear the field for himself. But as you have not yet committed the folly of getting married—that can not be it. Unless—"

"Well—finish!"

"No—no—I never mix myself up in the love affairs of my friends, when my friends do not tell me anything about them, and as you have never said a word to me about yours, you will be pleased if I keep my conjectures to myself."

Robert began to understand, and, as he had no longer any motive for concealing his visits to the Baroness, since Vignemale and the rest knew about them already, he said brusquely:

"Well, yes, I was at Mme. de Noyal's when I received this telegram. Do you think this could have been sent to draw me away from there?"

"It looks like it. I do not know what your relation to her is; but assuredly, you do not go to Chatenay every day to see the leaves sprout —you go there to make love. Perhaps you are not the only one, and some rival who is annoyed by your presence has played you this turn."

"With the consent of the Baroness, do you think?"

"At least with the consent of the rascal who brought the dispatch to you as if he had received it from a messenger. But I should like to know what you imagined when you read this riddle—"

"I believed that you had involved me in some operation and that there was danger of my losing a good deal of money."

"You have a pretty opinion of me."

"I did not stop to think."

"Well, I, who do think, say that the liar knows me and knows that we operate on the Bourse together, for he has used my name. I

do not like it, and I should be very much pleased to put my hand on the coward; I would pull his ears for him and even cut them off if he were worth the trouble. Will you help me find him?"

"I would like nothing better."

"Then I must know the precise relations between you and the Baroness de Noyal. It seems to me you have changed your opinion since the trial—you believed then that she was guilty."

"I have certainly learned that she was innocent." said Robert quickly.

"And I now doubt it."

"Because you do not know her. If you saw her, if you heard her, you would be convinced that she was wrongly accused."

"Well, let it be so. It is certain that her cousin was really and truly murdered."

"Yes, by some unknown person who haunted Rose Villa and persecuted the poor child with his declarations."

"What do you know about it? If Mme. de Noyal told you this, the testimony is subject to suspicion. But I have no desire to go over the trial again. I have only one question to ask you and I beg you to answer it exactly. Are you her lover?"

"No, and I shall never be."

"Excuse me—but does she not please you, or do you not suit her."

"I shall not be her lover, because I am going to marry her."

"Are you mocking me or are you speaking seriously?"

"Very seriously. I love her and I am sure that she loves me, and I am tired of living as I do."

"When is the wedding to take place?" asked Vignemale with imperturbable coolness.

"Mme. de Noyal is going back to Italy. I shall either go with her or join her there, and we shall be married there."

"That is a pity—If you were married in Paris the church would not hold your friends."

"Thanks for your appreciation," replied Robert dryly. "You asked me what were my relations with Mme. de Noyal; I have told you and I have not asked for your advice. I do not even ask you to keep the secret. I care very little whether the world praises or blames, I have the courage of my opinion. Now let it rest here I pray. All the objections you could make would not change my resolution."

"I preach to you! Whom do you take me for, my dear fellow? You are free to marry according to your fancy. There are all sorts of tastes in the world; and every one's is best. Only let me know when the event will take place, and if I do not have to cross the Alps, I will gladly be one of your witnesses. I only find fault with one thing—that you did not tell me sooner."

"We were only engaged to-day."

"Down at Rose Villa? Then the dispatch was very mal a-propos, and since you believe I sent it, you sent me to the devil, no doubt."

"I did, indeed. The dispatch was given me in the park just after we had exchanged promises."

"Did you show it to the Baroness?"

"Naturally—and she advised me to leave. I shall see her again to-morrow morning."

"Where?"

"At Chatenay, and perhaps it would be better for me to go back this evening to relieve her fears."

Vignemale shook his head like a surgeon who has a beautiful pathological case before him and said to himself:

"You are badly hurt, my dear friend, but I will save you in spite of yourself." And then aloud:

"You would be wrong. She would think that you are jealous, and besides, one ought never to surprise the women. Now, I trust

that you will not distrust me any more and will allow me to clear up the mystery of the false message."

"Very gladly. I have told you so already."

"Then you will not be angry if I ask you how Mme. de Noyal lives in the country?"

"She lives very quietly—she receives no one but me."

"Does she keep up an establishment?"

"A very moderate one: a lady's maid, a footman and a governess."

"What the devil can she do with a governess?"

"It is her cousin's old governess—she keeps her for a companion—she is a demoiselle of thirty-five years by the pretty little name of Severine."

"She has another name, I suppose."

"Her family name is Dahun."

"Dahun? That is queer—the firm in which I am interested has a client of that name who makes big deals; she invested eight

hundred thousand francs in Suez the other day."

"It certainly can not be the woman I have seen at Rose Villa."

"The capitalist of whom I am speaking lives in Paris, in the neighborhood of the Champs-Elysees. I have never seen her and I do not remember who told me that she got rich by managing the fortune of millionaires. She began by becoming the mistress of the husband, and has managed to remain the friend of the wife. I will inform myself more exactly. What kind of a person is this companion of the Baroness?"

"Not at all bad, in spite of her age; she has auburn hair and superb eyes—eyes full of fire and a face which is surprisingly intelligent.

"As far as I can judge, she is treated almost as an equal. I know very little about it, however, for I spoke to her to-day for the first time."

"Was she present when you received the dispatch?"

"No, why do you ask such a question?"

"Why? Let us see. You know very well that a pointer, before putting himself on the scent, takes the wind on all sides. You are the hunter and I am the dog, since I am going to help you find the rascal who deceived us."

"Very good! but this Severine has nothing to do with it."

"Who knows? Suppose that your frequent visits to the Baroness were displeasing to her. She would have taken a good way to disgust you with them."

"Why should my visits to the Baroness be displeasing to her?"

"Perhaps she has a fancy for you herself. This happens to old maids. I knew one who was in love with a young man. He would have nothing to do with her, and she could not compel him to marry her, but she prevented him marrying some one else. As soon as she

heard that he was courting another woman, she laid snares for her rival, and she succeeded in ruining her reputation. She would have killed her, I believe, rather than suffer him to marry her—and she gained her ends—he is still a bachelor."

"There is no sense in your supposition. This Severine thinks very little about me. I know that Mme. de Noyal has enemies who would like to force her to leave Chatenay."

"Is that true?"

"I would not believe it, but I had proof of it to-day. A troop of blackguards sang some insulting songs in front of one of the gratings in the park, and I recognized the leader of the band. Yon would have recognized him too, for you meet him every day—he is an old dancer who has turned into a commercial broker."

"Colimard! Jules Colimard!"

"Of the Moulin-Rouge; they used to call him Fil-de-Soie."

"I remember him perfectly, and now he works for a side-broker. It is enough to disgust one with the Bourse."

"Does he have any clients?"

"Some very big ones. I know of one who helped him to three commissions, the Marquis de Chenerailles. You know him also, for you told me that he rescued you from three villains who attacked you in the street. Have you ever seen him since?"

"I have met, him that is all."

"You will have a chance to see him near by and often. He has been presented at the club. He dined here yesterday and won twenty-five louis from me at cards—just half of the fifty which I won from you in our bet on the acquittal of the Baroness."

Robert du Plessis was so affected by these memories, recalled one after another, that it was in vain for him to try to dissimulate.

Vignemale seemed to make it a point to excite him by bringing up these old stories,

which did not appear to have any relation to what he called the telegraphic trick, and Robert began to think that Vignemale was right in insinuating that there was a rivalry of women at the bottom of all this. Had not Severine said that if the Baroness should marry again she should leave the house? Had not the Marquis de Chenerailles given his portrait to the governess who resembled him so strongly? and this gentleman employed Colimard as his agent at the Bourse, and Colimard went on Sunday to Chatenay to annoy Mme. de Noyal.

Were all these people in collusion against the Baroness? If M. de Chenerailles had been her enemy he would not have undertaken her defense. Had he become her enemy since the acquittal which he so brilliantly achieved?

Robert was not prepared to solve these problems.

Vignemale, who was watching him, from the corner of his eye, made no effort to relieve

him from his embarrassment. One would have said that he enjoyed it, he put an end to it, however, and to the situation by saying with an indifferent air:

"My friend, you are wonderfully good to worry yourself to death over so small a matter. Everything will be cleared up some day. Besides, since you have decided to marry, the history of the false telegram is of no importance, and I do not understand why you give yourself so much trouble over it. It will be time enough to think about it to-morrow. The night brings counsel; let us go dine at the Champs Elysees."

"Very well!" said Robert, more resigned than reassured.

They had left the balcony and were crossing the grand salon to go down to the street, when a footman of the club presented, on a plate, a letter to Robert du Plessis, saying:

"It came yesterday, but monsieur did not come here in the evening."

Robert took it with a gesture of impatience. Messages were pursuing him.

"I have an idea that is from a woman," said Vignemale.

The large, square letter did not look like a billet-doux, however.

Robert broke the seal and looked in vain for the signature.

"Is that a joke too?" asked Vignemale gayly.

The letter contained four pages of writing, in a large, regular hand like a book-keeper's, and was as follows:

"A friend whom you do not know, wishes to "prevent you from committing a folly of which "you will repent all your life. You have al- "lowed yourself to be ensnared by the falsest "and most perverse of women. She has de- "signs upon you, and since she has attracted "you to Chatenay, she has succeeded in per- "suading you that she did not kill her cousin. "It is true that she did not kill her with her

"own hand, she is too much of a coward. But "she sentenced her to death, and the murderer "had only to execute the sentence. I have "proofs of this, and although the incapacity of "the jury has saved her from punishment, it "lies with me to deliver her up to the contempt "and execration of all honest persons. But "her accomplice, who has not been tried, "would have to suffer in her stead, if I should "denounce her, and that would be unjust, for "he was only an instrument. I shall not de- "nounce her, but I wish you to know what "kind of a woman she is, and what she wishes "to do. Five years ago she swore that she "would marry you. The day that Jeanne con- "fessed to her that she loved you, the crime "was conceived, and the next day the unhappy "child was murdered in the park where the "murderer was watching for her, and where he "had been brought by the Baroness herself. "This woman is a monster. She would blow

"up a city to satisfy a caprice, and she de-
"pends upon you to reinstate her in the society
"from which she has been driven. She has
"not yet dared to disclose her projects, but
"she will not delay much longer, for her situa-
"tion at Chatenay is no longer tenable. She
"will be forced to go away, and she will pro-
"pose to you to follow her. If you should
"have the weakness to consent, you would be
"a lost man. I warn you. If you do not fol-
"low the disinterested advice which I give you,
"you will have only yourself to blame for all
"the misfortunes which will result from your
"folly!"

"Well, what is it about?" asked Vignemale.

Robert handed him the letter saying:

"Read it—it is anonymous—and tell me what you think of it?"

"I think it was written by a woman," said Vignemale after having read the letter.

"I do not think so. It is a man's writing."

"The ideas are certainly a woman's—as to

the writing, it is the same as that in the telegram; see for yourself," said Vignemale placing the dispatch before his eyes.

"There is a similarity—but—"

"It is the same, I tell you, and here is a discovery which will put us on the track. This person wrote you yesterday to prevent your going to Chatenay. He has telegraphed today to bring you away and the two messages are in the same hand."

"What do you conclude from this?"

"That the Baroness has an enemy in her own household."

"An enemy who slanders her falsely."

"I do not know that. These anonymous letters are very vulgar; but there is no harm in taking advantage of the indications that one finds in them."

"Then you believe that Mme. de Noyal paid a villain to murder her cousin, simply to prevent her from marrying me?"

"I assert nothing, but this idea came to me a long time ago. Do you remember our conversation in the court-room? I asked you if the Baroness did not have an inclination for you. You became quite red with anger. I was jesting then, but it seems to me now that I guessed right. But I have no advice to give you—for I believe in individual liberty. I have already made my professions of faith on this subject. Marry or not, my friend, we will always remain friends. And if I ever get hold of the amiable joker who has made use of my name, I will have an explanation with him which will remove all desire to do the same thing again. Just now we have nothing better to do than to drive out in order to refresh our ideas. I propose the terrace of the Ambassadeurs. Perhaps we will find some of our friends there, and we will wind up at the concert. You have given up the ridiculous idea of going back to Chatenay this evening."

"Entirely."

"Then let us start for the Champs Elysees, and to-morrow we will attend to business."

Robert followed his friend without delay. The anonymous letter and Vignemale's comments had thrown cold water on the enthusiasm of the lover and he saw that he had been in a great hurry to engage himself. He was not convinced that Mme. de Noyal was guilty, but he had begun to doubt her innocence and he was disposed to take time to clear away his doubt before becoming united with her for life.

But he was not unwilling to forget the cares which were tormenting, until the morrow, and he readily agreed to the proposal to pass the evening in jolly, or at least in numerous company.

CHAPTER VI.

The two friends had talked a long time before leaving the club, and when they reached the cafe they found it full. The warmth of this spring Sunday had attracted from everywhere those people who love to dine out of doors. They were everywhere, and on the terrace, facing the music-stand, every table was occupied. Some foreigners belonging to the genus excursionists, had invaded it; some third-rate fellows were taking a treat with some young women of no consequence, and some bourgeois couples had installed themselves there to enjoy the good cooking with the music thrown in.

"The devil!" growled Vignemale, "we are left! not a person we know! and what is worse not a vacant place! We shall have to go somewhere else."

Robert, better informed than his comrade, had just seen, quite near them, and sitting alone at a table which would easily accommodate four persons, a gentleman whom he had not expected to meet and who hastened to bow to him.

"That is Colimard's client," said Vignemale half aloud. "If he were polite he would offer us the seats opposite him. You have known him some time and he has won twenty-five louis from me. It wouldn't cost him anything to be polite to us and we should not be obliged to go away for lack of seats."

Colimard's heavy client was the Marquis de Chenerailles and he, no doubt, guessed what Vignemale was saying to his friend, for he rose and came with the best grace in the world, to invite them to take seats at the table where he was dining alone.

"I was expecting," he said, "two friends who have played me false. I will not wait for them

any longer, and I have two places to offer you."

Vignemale made no ceremony over accepting, and Robert did so only for form's sake. In other circumstances, he would have hesitated perhaps; but it seemed to him that he ought to take advantage of this unexpected interview to obtain some light on certain obscure sides of the present situation: for example the history of the portrait which he had seen in the room of the lady-companion. He would like also to find out the relations between the Marquis and Fil-de-Soie. These were two subjects which were difficult to approach; but, conversation between men at an improvised dinner, is likely to touch on many subjects and Vignemale would find a way to bring it about; Vignemale, who talked about everything even if he knew nothing about it.

M. de Chenerailles, with whom Robert had associated very little, was of a less exuberant nature, and the relations between them had

always been ceremonious; but this evening he seemed disposed to be friendly and was so amiable and simple that all embarrassment disappeared at once. They drank champagne, each paying his share, and the Roederer untied the tongues of all.

The Marquis had traveled a good deal and seemed to have mingled in the best society, and he engrossed the conversation, telling amusing anecdotes without obtruding his personality too strongly, which is the height of the art of talking. He seemed to avoid speaking of his family, his past or his origin; but your genuine noble never talks nobility. If that of M. de Chenerailles did not date from the Crusade, he was incontestably an accomplished gentleman, and if his antecedents had been dubious he would not have been, at Paris, on the jury list on which are inscribed the names of more bourgeois than grand seigneurs and where his name had figured by the side of that of M. Dauphin, the upholsterer.

Vignemale gave the cue and the talk did not languish; but Robert had not yet succeeded in leading to the subjects with which he was pre-occupied, when apropos of the disgrace of a fashionable woman who had recently enrolled herself in the great army of demi-mondaines, M. de Chenerailles said:

"Gentlemen, do you know what has become of the Baroness de Noyal since her judicial adventures?"

Robert was so surprised at the question that he remained silent.

"Perhaps you think that she has disappeared forever like a falling star," continued the Marquis. "Not at all! After an eclipse of some months, she is living quite near Paris, at the villa where she was arrested last year. I have it on good authority."

"That is very bold on her part," said Vignemale. "I was at the trial and I divined that this suave blonde was a superior person.

You will see that she will resume her place in society."

"Why not? asked Robert timidly. "She was acquitted."

"I was on the jury," said M. de Chenerailles, "and it was through me that she was acquitted. I was convinced of her innocence."

In the few visits which he had exchanged with the Marquis, Robert had always hesitated to speak of what had passed in the jury room. M. de Chenerailles, who had never said a word to him about it, now introduced the subject himself and continued:

"I had never visited at Mme. de Noyal's when I was summoned on the jury and I knew only the facts brought out at the trial. Now I am better informed; if I had it to do over again—"

"You would do it over again," sang Vignemale to the air of the "Brigands" of Offenbach.

"I do not think so," said M. de Chenerailles,

gravely. "The Baroness was released, but she had a narrow escape."

"Have you since found the proofs of her guilt?"

"Not the material proof; but the absolute conviction, and I have arrived at the conviction from information which was given me by a person whom I have known for a good many years and who has been very much mixed up with the life of Mme. de Noyal. She did not see her commit the crime, but she knows why it was committed, and this person is the former governess of the young girl."

"Severine!" cried Robert du Plessis.

"Miss Severine Dahun. You have often seen her at the house of the Baroness."

"Who has overwhelmed her with benefits which she repays by accusing her of an odious crime," said Robert.

"She could have ruined her, and she said nothing to the judge who presided at the trial. It is only recently that she came to consult

me, as she would have consulted her confessor upon a matter of conscience. You might be astonished that she chose to confide a secret which weighed heavily on her mind, to me, if I did not tell you that her family is connected with mine, and that she is almost a relation."

"Robert was on the point of saying: "She looks enough like you to be your sister;" but he restrained himself so as not to interrupt the Marquis in the flow of his confidence.

Vignemale, who was less reserved, hastened to say:

"She must also be related to one of our clients, who bears the same name and who has just withdrawn eight hundred thousand francs, which she had with my patron."

"She is the client herself," tranquilly replied M. de Chenerailles. "My old friend has, by her intelligence and economy, accumulated a very pretty capital and I have advised her in regard to its investment. She is going to retire to the provinces, and I hope she may

marry there, although she has waited almost too long. I have had some trouble to make her decide to leave the Baroness; I have finally succeeded in making her understand that her place is no longer at Rose Villa."

"Mme. de Noyal does not intend to remain there, I believe," said du Plessis.

"She would do well to leave, and the sooner the better, if she wishes to avoid insult."

"She has been insulted already."

"Yes," said Vignemale, "my friend du Plessis tells me that the insignificant Colimard, aided by some other blackguards, gave a charivari in front of the park grating. You know him very well, monsieur the Marquis?"

"The fellow who was called Fil-de-Soie of the Moulin-Rouge?"

"Exactly."

"I made his acquaintance there," said M. de Chenerailles laughing. "He was on very good terms with all the women, he was useful to me, and when I found him again at the Bourse,

where he has intruded himself, I helped him make some money. But I beg of you not to think that I sent him to Chatenay."

Everything concurred to make Robert believe that the Baroness had taken advantage of his credulity and weakness to extract a promise from him. The clear and frank language of M. de Chenerailles had dissipated the vague suspicions which the discovery of the portrait had aroused. This loyal and correct gentleman had been the first to speak of his relations to the family of the governess, and even of the protection which he accorded to the equivocal Fil-de-Soie. And it was impossible to suppose that these explanations had been prepared, for the Marquis could not have guessed that Robert du Plessis and Vignemale would come that evening to the Ambassadeurs.

Vignemale proposed that they should finish the evening at the Circus, and the Marquis accepted at once.

Robert was in no humor to accompany them, and he excused himself on the plea that his trip to the country had fatigued him and that the sun had given him a headache which the champagne had not made any better, and that he preferred to go to bed.

"That will be best," said Vignemale, slipping the anonymous letter and the false dispatch into his hand; "sleep the sleep of the just and have no bad dreams. I will come in the morning and wake you up, and we will breakfast at Tortoni's."

Robert did not refuse, although he had promised the Baroness to return to Chatenay by the first train, and leaving the restaurant, the three men shook hands and went their ways.

The house in which Robert lived was at the corner of Avenue Percier, and he was not far from the porte cochere when he saw a woman leaning against the door as if keeping guard. There was no reason for arresting her, and

without paying any attention to this belle of the night, he put his finger on the button of the bell. But the woman said to him:

"Good evening, monsieur. Do you not recognize me?"

"Not at all," responded Robert, who believed that she was one of the women who are on the lookout for adventures.

If she were one, she had chosen a very bad time and he was going to pass her rudely, but she said:

"You have seen me often at Rose Villa. I am Mme. de Noyal's maid. If you do not remember my face, perhaps you may recollect my name—Sylvia?"

"Are you the woman that Mme. de Noyal brought with her from Italy?"

"Yes, monsieur, from Pisa, where my last mistress had left me—Madame the Baroness did me a great service. I would go through the fire for her:"

"Very well, but I do not understand why I find you here."

"I have been here twenty minutes. Your porter told me that you had not come in. I waited for you in the street and I am glad that I did, for you are now here."

"What do you want?" asked Robert.

"I must first give you this note from Madame the Baroness."

Robert, stupefied, took from the woman's hand a leaf of paper which looked as if it had been torn from a note-book, and by the light of a gas-jet he deciphered some lines hastily written in pencil:

"A danger threatens me. A terrible danger. "I have no hope but in you: Come. You may "depend on Sylvia. Please God she may find "you and bring you here. If I must never see "you again, do not forget me."

This was certainly the writing of the Baroness. Robert could not be mistaken in this, but his first thought was, that this singular

appeal was only a new mystification, and that it concealed a snare.

"Have you no special commission from Mme. de Noyal?" asked Robert.

"Oh! yes, monsieur: I must bring you back with me without fail."

"Ah! Do you know what your mistress has written to me?"

"No, monsieur; but I suspect."

"Then tell me what it means."

"Yes, monsieur. You know Severine?"

"Mlle. Caristie's governess?"

"That is the one! and she is a woman that James and I cordially dislike."

"Who is James?"

"The footman that Madame brought from Italy. A splendid Englishmen. Have you never noticed him?"

"Upon my word, no, Sylvia. But go on, you were speaking of Severine."

Was he about to find the key to the mystery which his interview with the Marquis had

made still more obscure? But, he was on his guard, decided to believe nothing without proofs, and above all not to return to Chatenay unless it was absolutely necessary.

"I have watched Severine for nearly a month," said Sylvia. "The neighbors have told me the history of Madame, and I adore Madame. I agreed with James to watch this big red-headed woman with her sharp eyes which have not the catholic look at all. I saw that she was always writing, keeping accounts, and never getting through. But she does not leave her papers lying about and she always carries her own letters to the post; she is afraid, no doubt, that some one will see the name of her acquaintance—for I am sure she has an acquaintance."

"Be short; the time is passing, and if we wish to take the train—"

"Yes, monsieur, at forty minutes past ten. Let us start now, I will explain to you on the way."

She took his arm and drew him gently forward.

"No, Sylvia," said he disengaging himself, "I must know first."

"Know what? that Madame is in great danger down there? She must have written that to you, and it is God's truth."

"What danger?"

"Severine and the villains with whom she has an understanding. I saw two of them roaming about this evening; one of them I know very well—he is quite handsome, but he has a wicked look. Stop! it is that good-for-nothing, who made a charivari this morning, with a lot of his own kind."

Robert began to be interested once more in the misfortunes of the Baroness.

"Let us go, monsieur," repeated Sylvia. "If we lose a minute we may miss the train."

"We will take the next one, that is all. There are trains running until midnight."

"The next train! And what if we get there too late."

"But," persisted Robert, "why did not Mme. de Noyal come herself instead of sending you?"

"Because of those fellows, who are strolling about. Madame is so timid! I was not any too brave myself. I know a path—I only tell that to you. I slipped out by the little door, and I reached the scholar's road, but not for my own pleasure."

A victoria was passing.

Sylvia hailed the driver, opened the door and said to Madame's lover:

"Come, monsieur, get in," and he obeyed.

"To the Sceaux station," ordered the amazing soubrette. "If you get there at ten thirty-five you shall have a handsome pour-boire."

She threw herself into the carriage, and sat down, without any ceremony beside Robert, who found her very amusing.

"I am listening to you Sylvia. In your opinion and that of James," said he smiling, "the Severine is the chief of a band—a sort of Cartouche in petticoats."

"Worse than that, perhaps! Listen to me monsieur, and you shall judge: This morning when you came, I saw that the big red-head, who is very fond of you, I am sure of it, intended to see you on your arrival. I was at a window on the first floor when you came through the gate. There was no one to receive you. You see it is Sunday, and James had gone to play bowls, and did not return till two hours after. I listened and I heard you go into Madame's favorite parlor. I also heard Severine go there and the sound of your voices through the floor. My faith, I could hold back no longer, and, pardon me, monsieur, but it was for Madame's sake—you understand."

"Not at all."

"Eh well, I stretched myself on the floor and listened."

"I understand."

"And I remember what she said last to you: 'Angelique is free to marry again as I am free to leave her if she should do so foolish a thing.' I have a good memory."

"And good ears too," said Robert.

"Yes, monsieur, at your service and Madame's. I said to myself—'Severine you do not want Madame to marry again, especially that man for whom you have a weakness.' When you were last in the park where Madame was waiting for you—you see I know all about it! I wished to see Severine close by, and I watched her without appearing to do so. She was angry, and at what! She knew that Madame and you would not waste your time in talking politics. When those blackguards were singing: 'In the street Lique-Liquetowne,' a song made for the occasion, I looked through the key-hole into her den. She laughed at the rubbish until her face was as red as a beet."

"Are you sure?"

"I do not keep my eyes in my pocket."

"Nor your ears either.

"Certainly not. Not long after I heard some one go out into the park. I went upstairs and posted myself at a window on the stairs which overlooks the whole place. What did I see but Severine gliding along under the trees like a snake, and I saw her, as plain as I see monsieur, hide herself behind the hedge."

But the victoria now stopped suddenly at the station. Robert looked at his watch; it was thirty-five minutes past ten. He gave a pour-boire to the coachman, and entered the train without any hesitation.

CHAPTER VII.

They had got into a vacant first-class compartment, but at the moment the train was about to start, two other travelers entered and took their places opposite and Sylvia was obliged to stop her recital.

Robert rebelled against the wise slowness with which the Sceaux railroad follows its interminable curves. They reached Sceaux at last, however, and as they had a little more than a mile to walk in the moonlight, Sylvia had time to finish her confessions and confidences.

"From my observatory I continued to watch Severine, and I confess to you that my heart beat very hard. It was from that hedge, you know better than I, that the shot was fired which killed Madame's cousin. I had strange thoughts. If James had only been there; but

the rascal lingered at the bowls—he is a first-class player—besides, I thought that your presence would protect the poor woman from her enemies."

"That was well reasoned, Sylvia. Go on; but let us hurry."

He took long strides and she trotted after him.

"When I saw you two stop before the hedge, where that snake was watching, my heart was in my mouth. Suddenly Madame trembled as she pointed with a frightened air at Severine's hiding-place. Oh! I surely thought that the jade had been caught in the very act; but you supported Madame and resumed the conversation. Good! said I to myself, she must hear every word! she is in the very best place to hear, and I could see that you and Madame were not saying disagreeable things."

"Be brief, Sylvia, I beg of you."

She was obliged to stop a minute to take breath. They could see the trees of the park

and it would not take more than ten minutes to reach there, but how long these minutes seemed!

"Well, Sylvia, what then?" said he, as he invited her to take his arm, which she did with an air of satisfaction.

"Did you not make a search in the hedge, monsieur?"

"Yes, Sylvia."

"Did not a black-bird fly out, and did you not laugh?"

"Yes, but what then?"

"That black-bird made itself an accomplice of Severine. But there was something else. James brought you a dispatch, and you went away after stopping to look into the room where the serpent concocts her schemes."

Robert interrupted her to ask who had brought the dispatch.

"One of the singers of the Rue Lique-Lique-towne, the little brown one with the wicked

look. I recognized him by the description which James had given me."

"Fil-de-Soie again, the scoundrel!" thought Robert. "But go on, or rather finish, for we are here."

She made him stop a few minutes and finished her story.

"Before dinner I took Madame aside and spoke to her alone. I told her all and she grew as white as wax. Suddenly I heard the front gate shut. I ran to the window and saw Severine hurrying to the station, no doubt to carry the letters which she writes every day. Madame looked after her and then went quickly down to the little room. I followed, and as she did not tell me to go away I remained. Madame tried every one of her own keys, but not one would fit the drawers of the secretary. 'Wait, Madame' said I. I went to my room and came back with a lot of small keys which I had inherited from an old Italian gentleman with whom I have lived in Pisa.

Madame tried one after another of them and would you believe it? it was the very last one that opened the rose-jar. Madame began to search among the papers. She trembled like a leaf but she did not forget to put everything in order. At last she found a letter which made her cry out. I thought she was going to faint. But she recovered herself, refolded the letter, put it back under the pile, reclosed the drawer and went up to her room where I followed her as you know."

"Go on, go on."

"Madame wrote the note which I brought to you, put it in an envelope and told me to take it to you and to bring you back immediately. She is waiting for you in the park, near the small door, through which I came out. That is why I have kept you here, that we may go around the place. My God! what if any of the band should have seen us."

Robert looked around him. It was as light as day. There was no one to be seen.

They went along the wall of the park as far as the door, which was half concealed by the stems of the ivy falling down from the inside in natural wreaths.

They walked as stealthily as wolves, lovers, or thieves. They stopped at the door.

From that point they could see the bench on the hillock.

There was no one on the bench.

Robert risked being discovered:

"Angelique," said he in a low and mysterious tone.

There was no response.

Sylvia seized his hand.

"I am afraid," said she in a low voice. "What if we should fall into some snare. Have you a pistol?"

"Chut!"

He thought he heard some one walking behind the wall.

They listened.

But no, it was the noise of the wind among the bushes.

Sylvia trembling, gave him the key of the door and put herself behind him.

He opened the door.

It creaked lightly on its hinges.

Before closing it again, Robert made a slight pause.

If Mme. de Noyal were in the neighborhood she would not fail to meet her faithful servitor.

There was no one!

Robert examined the woman with suspicion.

But Sylvia's pretty face expressed so real a fear that Angelique's lover became alarmed also—not for himself, but for the Baroness, left alone with Severine.

He searched the park and his imagination was so excited that, when a moonbeam threw its white train between the trunks of two trees, in the shadow of a cluster of wood, he fancied he saw a woman's form extended upon the ground.

He advanced towards the villa.

"Have you the key?" he asked of Sylvia.

"Yes, monsieur; but if we go in by the door, the serpent will have us, and who knows what may happen to us."

"The serpent will not swallow both of us."

"Oh! monsieur, do not go in at the door."

"How shall I get in then?"

"Through the window."

This would turn the Shakesperian tragedy into Italian comedy. Robert du Plessis did not care to renew at Chatenay the balcony scene of the Veronese lovers. The Baroness was a little too mature for the role of Juliet, and, while having a very good opinion of himself, he did not aspire to play the part of Romeo.

"If Vignemale should see me climbing up there he would take me for a mandolin player serenading his mistress," said he.

But we have seen Sylvia at work. When

that Parisian has a project in her head, one must resign himself to her wishes.

"Monsieur will find a ladder in the carriage house where James is waiting for him."

"Ah! James expects you? Perfect! Well my beauty, there is nothing to fear since the Englishman is taking care of us. Do me the favor to go up to Madame's room and ask her if she has need of my protection. Bring the answer to me in five minutes at most. This over, I will return to Paris by the way we came. I have the key of the little door."

"But, Monsieur, if Severine——?"

"That is all the same to me."

Sylvia understood that he would not give it up and resigned herself to obey.

"All right, monsieur, I am going. I will try to make as little noise as possible. Severine's room is on the other side towards the street. It is very likely that she will not hear me. Give me two minutes more to tell James."

"Go!"

He turned his back to her, but he saw her from one side, glide like a sylph over the gravel which scarcely cracked under her feet.

He began to feel a tardy remorse; what if this girl was in any real danger? It was, surely, neither gallant nor chivalric to send her alone as a scout.

Bah! was not the footman there to keep watch?

Robert contented himself by approaching the house slowly.

In passing before the hedge, where the unknown assassin had hidden, and where Mlle. Severine had concealed herself this very afternoon, he experienced a singular apprehension. It was so strong that he hastened his steps, and soon perceived the impassible James who was standing before the half-open door.

He joined him, and tapping him on the shoulder, asked in a low voice:

"What do you think of all this?"

"Nothing," said James.

Robert looked at his watch. The seven minutes allowed to Sylvia had nearly expired

Suddenly light footsteps were heard. Somebody is coming down the stairs in great haste.

It is a woman. No, it is not Angelique. Robert could have distinguished the rustle of her dress distinctly.

It is Sylvia. She is very pale and her eyes are wild.

"Oh! monsieur! Oh! James!"

She tries to speak, but she is so oppressed that the words will not come from her mouth.

At last she conquers her emotion.

"I knocked at the door," said she, "and Madame did not answer."

"You did not knock loud enough," said Robert, who supposed that the Baroness was asleep.

"Yes, indeed, monsieur. Madame is a very light sleeper. And then Madame is locked in, which proves that she is inside. I thought I smelt charcoal coming from under the door.

I tried to look through the key-hole, and I found it was stopped up with rags. Then I ran away."

"Suicide!" And she had summoned him, the friend, the lover, who had just offered to protect her against the malevolence of the world, to witness that she was dead."

Poor, brave woman!

He would save her if it were not too late.

"Quick, James, bring the ladder. Do you know how to open the blind?"

"Yes, monsieur."

The Englishman came back in a few moments, holding the ladder with both hands, and between his teeth a pair of pincers, such as is used by burglars. James placed the ladder against the front of the house, mounted slowly to the windows, unfastened the blinds and said:

"It is done!"

"What do you see?" asked Robert.

"Nothing."

"Come down."

The Englishman obeyed, Robert took his place, and without any further precaution broke a pane of glass—the pieces fell inside without much noise.

A puff of carbonic acid escaped through the window.

Robert was obliged to turn to one side to get the air; but at the same moment he turned the fastening of the window.

And a moment after, he was in the room.

CHAPTER VIII.

Sylvia's disclosures were exact to the letter.

Yes, she had followed Severine with the finesse and vigilance of a police spy; she had seen her hide in the hedge; she had informed her mistress, who had made an immediate examination of the governess' secretary.

What had there been so alarming in the letter which Mme. de Noyal discovered among the private papers of the large *rousse* with the sharp eyes?

In order to comprehend the document, it must be understood, that the wealthy widow had been so imprudent as to confide the management of her fortune to this woman.

Very ignorant of figures, a little inclined to be idle, and knowing that her late husband had often had recourse, in important affairs, to the knowledge of the governess, she retained her and made her her steward.

When a widow who has been accustomed to live without any care, is the possessor of two millions, she does not imagine that she will ever see the end of them. Besides, Angelique spent very little in proportion to her income, and every time that Mlle. Dahun made her monthly statement, she contented herself with saying:

"That is all right! But spare me the details, if you please. I am satisfied to know that I am still comfortable."

She paid her generously and made her many rich presents. She would not allow her to spend her own money for a single trinket, and had given her permission to go to her own dress-maker. She even admired the reserve with which Severine made use of this liberality.

So it may be imagined from what a height she fell, when she learned that the creature had been deceiving her for eight years, that she had been her husband's mistress, and taken advantage of his weakness and prodigality,

that she had stolen all along the line, and was stealing still, and that, worst of all, she was a party to the crime at Rose Villa.

All this she learned from the following letter, signed "M. de C." and dated the evening before:

"Dear sister,

"You are very unreasonable to get "into your head a project which can not succeed and which has already cost so many tears "and so much remorse.

"Admitting that the gentleman in question, "who, in my opinion, is very unattractive, would "be willing to marry you, it would not be long "before he would know, what everybody, excepting *her* knows already, thanks to the "pratings of the defunct, who was our goose "that laid the golden eggs. He would learn "that you owe a part of your fortune to the "liberality of the husband, and that the rest "comes from despoiling his widow.

"I pray you, renounce a dream which can-
"not be realized. Settle your affairs and join
"me as soon as possible in London, whence we
"will go to America, where we will lead a
"gilded existence, beyond the reach of inquis-
"itive eyes.

"But, if, neglecting my advice, you listen a
"second time to the promptings of jealousy, I
"will not be there to save you from the conse-
"quences. Before leaving, be sure to put your
"accounts in order—look out for the balance
"sheet! But whatever may be your skill in fig-
"ures you still lack practice. We must have a
"session of three or four hours in order to ex-
"amine all your books and strengthen the
"weak places.

"I will be at Chatenay at two o'clock to-
"morrow night and we will employ the rest of
"the night in preparing a statement of which
"*she* will only see the ashes.

"In any event, *she* will not have anything to

"complain of as she will still have a good "million.

"As for me, I have made my last venture at "the Bourse, although it has doubled our "wealth. It is ended, I shall never go near it "again. I just escaped, last month, and I "shall remember it all my life.

"In short, I should be the most fortunate of "men if that stupid Cadornac had not exhibited "my portrait at the last Salon.

"According to your desire, I have ordered "my *dancer* to annoy the patroness by singing "a silly song to-morrow at her gate; but these "puerile means astonish me and can lead to "nothing. The gentleman never took any "notice of you, even when you were face to "face with him. You expect to dazzle him "with your fortune; but he is rich himself, and "your money will not tempt him.

"Then, day after to-morrow—two o'clock in "the morning, precisely. Be sure to burn this "letter.

"M. DE C."

Angelique had no trouble to interpret these initials: M. de C. was this Marquis de Chenerailles, of whom Severine was said to be the sister by "accident of marriage," and whom she had won over, so she affirmed, to the cause of her mistress at the time of the trial.

She had had the audacity to bring him to her and reproach her for having received him so coldly.

There was no doubt that the Marquis de Chenerailles' title was a spurious one, but then how did he get this title which nobody contested and under which he had been sworn on the jury of the Seine? Anything might be suspected of such a bandit. He must have stolen his papers and parchments from the genuine Marquis, perhaps murdered him to obtain them.

So the Baron de Noyal had kept Severine Dahun even in the home of his wife. How infamous!

But Angelique cared very little for that now. She had learned in a few weeks after her marriage that the husband, who had been forced upon her by the cupidity of her family, was a nullity. She felt very little regret for him although she piously renewed the wreaths on his tomb at Montparnasse.

But the first part of the letter interested her more than all the rest. The deplorable preferences of the Baron were of little importance. She did not care for the million which had been stolen. She only remembered the cruel suffering of the Court of Assizes, her reputation ruined forever by an acquittal, snatched from the majority, thanks to the persuasive eloquence of M. de Chenerailles.

The words, "which have cost so many tears and so much *remorse*," were a revelation. The murderer of Jeanne Caristie must be either the sister or the brother; for they were surely of the same blood, as could be seen by their tawny complexion.

Why had Severine Dahun concealed herself behind the hedge in the afternoon? To learn whether the man whom she wished to win, at any cost, was not already bound to a second rival by a sacred promise.

She had heard all!

Angelique felt the cold sweat run down her face at the thought.

She was incapable of making any decision. She was in need of support and counsel—of a sincere friendship and a devotion without limit. She would find this devotion in that one whose hesitations she did not suspect.

"Robert," she said to herself, "loves me well enough not to doubt my innocence. The world still suspects me, and he braves the world. He does not hesitate to protect me with his name and acquit me a second time by taking me for his wife. He is the only one who is capable of protecting me."

So, fearing by a sudden departure to excite the suspicions of the infamous woman, the

Baroness de Noyal had sent immediately for her fiance for whom she would wait at the little door of the park.

Before going away Sylvia had said to her:

"I beg Madame to let James wait on her at table. Madame can have confidence in James, James will have an eye on everything and Madame has nothing to fear."

The Baroness de Noyal having partly recovered from her emotion, made an effort to remove all traces of it from her face. She tried to smile; but this was too much for her. The fires of spite, of indignation and of unsatisfied vengeance burned in her eyes. Her mouth was compressed but her lips trembled slightly.

By a great effort, however, she was able to appear almost the same as usual, and when the bell announced dinner, she descended to the dining-room with a firm step.

Severine was already at the table, her brow contracted in a tragic frown.

Angelique sat down opposite to her.

When women set themselves to dissembling their thoughts, they succeed better than the most accomplished diplomats.

"Well!" said the Baroness to her steward, "you look quite sad this evening. I wager that you have made a mistake in your addition. Do not let it take away your appetite or your sleep. If I were in your place, I should not keep any more accounts. Why should you give yourself so much trouble? We receive money—that is good—we use it, that is better still, and provided that the outgo does not exceed the income, we are certain of not getting into debt which is the essential thing."

There was so much point to this good-humored pleasantry that it seemed to disturb Severine.

She raised her eyes to her benefactress and was reassured. Angelique was laughing.

James brought in the soup.

"Where is Sylvia?" asked the governess.

"She has gone out. She has my permission until ten o'clock."

The footman had arrayed himself in full dress to wait on Madame. He gravely placed the soup tureen upon the table and went out.

"My accounts are really a little behind, but they will be audited by the day after to-morrow," said Mlle. Dahun.

"Audited is a very ugly word," said Angelique mockingly.

They both ate daintily. Great emotions diminish the appetite.

After the repast was over, they withdrew to the parlors as was usual.

Angelique opened the piano and played a waltz of Chopin mechanically.

Severine occupied herself in making some new handkerchiefs. What a precious auxiliary was Mlle. Dahun! She never lost a minute. To see her so orderly and industrious, one who was not thoroughly acquainted with her past would have said she was born to make the

happiness of a good husband. As for those who knew all about her, and who said nothing to the person most interested, they only smiled at her ways.

James, having no longer an excuse for remaining, left the two women alone for a couple of hours.

Angelique waited impatiently for her stewardess to retire to her room, which she usually did at nine o'clock. Tired of the piano, she drew near the table and turned over the leaves of a Fashion Magazine. From time to time she examined stealthily the countenance of her enemy, which was in no wise reassuring.

Knowing that the Marquis would not come to the villa before two o'clock in the morning, the Baroness remained calm. But in spite of the charm of a delightful spring evening, she did not dream of walking in the park; she would have been afraid to pass in front of the hedge.

Mlle. Dahun broke the silence which was becoming embarrassing.

"Madame the Baroness," said she brusquely, "has made me anxious for some time."

"Of what Baroness are you speaking?" asked Angelique, feigning surprise.

The storm was rumbling.

"Why, of you, Madame, responded Severe.

"Then it is I who cause you anxiety, my good Severe, and why?"

"Madame will blame me, perhaps, for interesting myself in that which does not concern me?"

"Certainly not, Severe, everything here concerns you. I have left the care of my fortune to you, and you have been the confidant of all my troubles. This gives you the right to speak to me plainly concerning whatever touches me or my interests. And to begin with, do not call me 'Madame the Baroness,' as big as your arm. This is the fiftieth time I have said so."

"Oh! Madame, how good you are, and how much I love you!"

Angelique turned away to hide the flush of indignation which mounted to her cheek, and gave to her eyes, usually so mild, an almost ferocious expression.

"Go on Severe, you are anxious about me."

"Very. I suspect that Madame is thinking of marrying again."

"And what then?"

"I dread a second marriage for Madame. I should like to have had Madame first prove her innocence in the mysterious crime of this accursed villa. Oh! if I had only been with you on that day how much more convincing my testimony would have been! What a fatality!"

"Oh yes! Mademoiselle Dahun, what a fatality!"

The governess looked at her, frightened by the word "Mademoiselle" pronounced in a threatening tone.

But the Baroness de Noyal saw her imprudence, and repaired it by a burst of laughter.

"Oh! oh!" said she, "Severe does not wish me to marry again! And why?"

"I am going to tell Madame. The honeymoon once over—and Madame has paid dear to learn that it does not last long—it will not be long before her husband perceives that the world looks cross-wise at him; he will reflect, he will doubt, like so many other idiots, and then there will be trouble in the family."

So much impudence surpassed in audacity anything that one could possibly have expected of the former mistress of Baron de Noyal.

"Then you believe, Severe, that the world still doubts my innocence, and that it will make Robert feel its contempt?"

At that name, pronounced with a gentle, loving voice, Severine let her work fall upon her knees and turned very pale.

How she loved this "insignificant gentleman," whom the Marquis de Chenerailles found so unattractive!

"Then," said she, "it is M. du Plessis that Madame the Baroness wishes to marry?"

"He has no doubt of it—not he!"

"Oh! if Madame the Baroness only knew M. du Plessis as I know him!"

It was now Angelique's turn to be jealous.

"What do you mean by saying that?"

"He has had a great many adventures," said the stewardess.

"Every man has before he ends the series by a marriage for love or for reason which does not prevent him from beginning over again, a few years, if not a few months after the wedding."

Severe bit her lips and a wicked wrinkle appeared between her eyebrows.

"He is a gambler," she continued, "an incurable gambler! He has lost large sums on the Bourse. He is on the verge of ruin, and he

poses before Madame as a disinterested and unprejudiced person only that he may recover himself."

"But how do you know so much about M. du Plessis, Severe?"

"Through my brother, the Marquis de Chenerailles, who is acquainted with him and knows of his operations on the Bourse, and has seen him put up fabulous sums at the club."

This denunciation roused the spirit of the Baroness, and she could not, in spite of the danger suspended over her head, dissimulate any longer.

"Ah! well! Mademoiselle," she cried, "you may say to the Marquis de Chenerailles, your brother, perchance, that he will do well in future not to interfere in my affairs."

"Severe pushed back her chair with a sudden movement and, rising at once, said:

"Madame, the Baroness, did not talk in this way of my brother when he took the trouble to defend her."

"Be silent!"

The two women measured one another with a look.

At this moment the door opened, and James entered, bringing the evening paper.

The intendant retired slowly without looking around.

The disagreement was complete, but Severe could not, in the opinion of the Baroness, suspect the true cause.

"James," she said, "tell the cook to bring a cup of tea to my room at once."

"Yes, Madame."

Angelique was suffocating. She went up to her room. It was half past nine o'clock. She would come down in a little while and hide herself in a cluster of trees near the small door.

For the first time since the iniquitous trial, Angelique tried to pray.

"My God," said she, "make Sylvia find my dear Robert. My God, protect me."

The cook did not take her the tea until more than a quarter of an hour had passed.

"You have been a long time," said she gently.

"Excuse me, Madame; but I did not have any tea, and I went to Mademoiselle for some and she was arranging her papers and made me wait five minutes."

A great fear came over the Baroness: what if Severe should discover that some one had been fumbling in her desk! that some one had read M. de Chenerailles' letter!

Her throat burned with thirst. She poured out a cup of tea and drank it all at one draught, without any sugar. It left a bitter taste in her mouth.

"What bad tea that is!" she muttered. Suddenly a terrible thought caused her to utter a cry of distress. She turned out the tea remaining in the cup, examined it and smelt it.

"What if it were poison! What if Jeanne Caristie's murderer has not recoiled at a second crime!"

And the Baroness thought that such a crime would again remain unpunished. The world which believed her guilty, would not hesitate to conclude that remorse had caused her to commit suicide.

She looked at herself in the glass. She was frightened at her pallor. An invincible stupor overcame her.

She put her hand to her head from which all thought was going away.

She took three steps towards the bell, extended her hands, called for help in a stifled voice and fell in the middle of the room on the thick carpet which deadened her fall.

She felt no pain, but she was still conscious, for a few seconds, when all her faculties were extinguished.

It is ended! The Baroness de Noyal was overwhelmed in a cataleptic sleep.

CHAPTER IX.

When she awoke, she was lying on her bed, and Robert was sitting beside her with a smile of infinite tenderness on his face.

"Is it you Robert?"

"Oh! How could you be willing to die without me!"

Parisian life had not yet destroyed the natural sensibility of Robert du Plessis. There were tears in his eyes as he assisted in the resuscitation of the beautiful widow.

Angelique held out her hands to him. He took them and bent over her until his lips almost touched hers.

"Oh! What madness!" he exclaimed. "Why do you despair of happiness? So you wished to die rather than keep your promise to me?"

"To die?" said she trying to understand.

"Yes—and such a death! the most frightful of all: asphyxiation by charcoal. How you must have suffered, my poor dear, before you lost consciousness!"

"Suffered? No, I did not suffer at all. I slept that was all. Stop! I dreamed of you and of myself. I dreamed we were receiving the nuptial benediction at Venice. There were beautiful young girls and handsome young men, in shining garments, who looked at us with envy."

This was too much for him. He took advantage of the situation and embraced her long and fervently, but she did not protest.

"Angelique!"

"Robert!"

"I love you."

But now memory returned to the lovely sleeper, and all the drama of the evening rose before her with surprising clearness.

She sat up.

"No, Robert, I did not wish to die. That would have been cowardly after your oath, in which I have faith. Some one has tried to kill me and gave me a narcotic, wait! it was in the tea. I had just drank it when I felt a weight on my brain, on my heart. My limbs gave way under me, I tried to ring, I called for help, and then I fell in the middle of the room. I knew nothing after that. How did you get here?"

"Through the window."

"What?"

"Yes, through the window. Sylvia had been up and knocked at your door, and you had not answered. The key-hole was stopped. There was an odor of carbonic-acid from under your door. The poor girl came to tell me and James brought me a ladder."

The Baroness rose from the bed. An invincible terror took possession of her.

"I understand," said she. "Let us flee, Robert. He would kill both of us!"

"Who then?"

"The Marquis de Chenerailles."

"He!" cried Robert.

He ran to the window which was still wide open.

"James," said he, "have you any weapon?"

"I have my gun, monsieur," replied the Englishmen; "and I have my fists."

"Get your gun and wait for orders."

Then he went to the door and listened.

"There is nothing there," he said.

Returning to Angelique, he gave her a paper which he had just taken from a stand.

"Did you write that Angelique?"

"I have written nothing," said she.

"Read that paper."

It ran as follows:

"Let no one be accused of my death! I "murdered my cousin Jeanne Caristie. Ac- "quitted through the mistake of the jury, I "condemn myself.

ANGELIQUE RABUTIN, THE WIDOW NOYAL."

"Oh! the infamous wretches," cried Angelique. "What an infernal plot! They put me to sleep first, then they lighted the charcoal and stopped all the passages for the air; and last they wrote this note in imitation of my writing."

Robert showed her the chafing-dish in which coal was still burning in the fire-place beside a pile of wet rags.

"Those rags were stuffed up the chimney and closed it tightly when I got into the room. The coal was three-fourths consumed. How you escaped death is a mystery to me. I can only explain it by your cataleptic condition. The assassin who prepared the narcotic gave too large a dose through ignorance. It produced syncope. You did not breathe and that saved you."

Angelique looked at the clock. It was half past twelve.

"There is nothing to fear yet. He will not come until two o'clock in the morning."

She told Robert all that had happened since Sylvia's providential disclosures. The letter had made so strong an impression that she could repeat almost every word.

"What an idiot that Noyal was!" thought Robert.

She reported exactly the conversation with Mlle. Dahun after dinner, and the denunciation of which he had been the object.

"Ah well, yes, I have gambled on the Bourse and at the club," confessed Robert, "but I have my excuse. When a man is rich and not happy he kills time by ruining himself. This is done every day to the joy of the lookers on. But now that you love me, Angelique, and are going to be my wife, I solemnly swear, not that I will never play any more, that would be too hard, but never to play high."

Robert knew everything now.

"Ah!" said he, "the Marquis de Chenerailles will be here at two o'clock. He shall be well received. But this woman who pretends to

love me, will probably go out soon to meet her brother in the park. And James will be in front of the door with his gun; and brave Sylvia who sustains James by her presence."

Perceiving that Angelique was looking at the door in terror—he continued:

"You do not wish to stay here alone, and I understand that. We are going to take our precautions."

He assured himself that the door was securely locked.

"Where is the key?" he asked.

"When I came in it was on the inside. It has been taken away."

"No," said a guttural voice, "it was thrown out of the window. I have it."

And James handed the key to M. du Plessis.

"Listen, James."

"Yes, monsieur."

"Have you only one gun?"

"Yes, monsieur, but if monsieur would like a revolver, here it is."

And he drew from his pocket a superb six-shooter which Robert took immediately.

"The six balls are all here are they?"

"Oui, monsieur."

"Tell Sylvia to keep well out of sight. You post yourself in the little chalet which commands the wall toward the country. I will conceal myself behind the hedge. You will soon see Mlle. Dahun pass you and go to the small door where she will wait for some one. Do not stir, but when she returns with this person, you will come up behind them and take aim. I will do the same in front. When you hear me say: 'surrender!' you will cry: 'halt there!' They will be between two fires and they will surrender. We will lock them up in a secure place, and you will go for the commissaire."

"Of course, monsieur."

James disappeared from the window like a hero of pantomime.

In spite of these precautions, Angelique could not decide to confront solitude in her room, and Robert was obliged to help her descend the ladder, which she did with wonderful agility. Robert put out the lights, reclosed the blinds and, revolver in hand, hastened toward the hedge, followed by the Baroness.

Sylvia, finding that Madame intended to share her lover's danger, clung close to James, who was easily persuaded to take her with him to the chalet.

All was once more silent and calm. It was marvelous that Severine had heard nothing—no doubt she was absorbed in her accounts.

The trap was set; would the game permit itself to be taken? In an hour they would know. It was not without fear that Mme. de Noyal crouched beside her lover, in the very place where the murderer of Jeanne Caristie had concealed himself. She pressed close to Robert, and said in a trembling voice:

"I am afraid! This man is a desperate ruffian."

"Villains always surrender when they can not defend themselves."

At half past one, they heard the gravel of the park crackle under the feet of some one coming from the house.

Thanks to the moonlight, they distinguished Severine walking on the tips of her toes.

She was deathly pale. She stopped a moment as she was passing the hedge and they heard her utter an "Ah!" which made them fear that they had been discovered.

A heart-breaking sob followed the sigh and the sister of the Marquis de Chenerailles slowly withdrew, like Lady Macbeth wandering in the midnight through her domain.

The hour was approaching.

Robert explained to Angelique the necessity of going a short distance away from her. He advanced with his back bent under the trees

and reached a turning where he could see the scoundrels as they approached.

The Marquis was prompt to the minute. At five minutes past two he was with his sister in the main path of the park. The moment to act had come.

James, faithful to his orders, was just coming down from the chalet—with great long strides he came up behind.

Robert stepped from his hiding-place. He was not more than twenty steps from the Marquis.

"Surrender!" he cried, pointing the weapon at him.

"Halt!" said James in a voice of thunder.

The Marquis turned toward the Englishman. He did not hesitate to defend his life at all hazards. The bandit had a loaded revolver in his pocket.

"I surrender," said he, advancing rapidly towards James.

"Halt!" repeated the latter.

The Marquis made a bound to one side and fired right and left six shots from the revolver. Robert was not touched, but James, who was slightly grazed on the left shoulder by one of the balls, uttered a sharp cry of pain.

There was the sound of another shot and the Marquis fell to the ground.

Two women rushed forward, the Baroness trembling for Robert, and Sylvia for James.

At the sight of her brother extended on the ground with his head shattered, Severe fainted.

"I am hurt," said James, "but that scoundrel got his pay."

They carried the stewardess into the carriage-house and locked the door. As had been arranged, James, without stopping to have his wounds dressed, ran for the commissary of police.

That magistrate arrived at five o'clock in the morning, with his secretary, two inspectors and a physician.

He verified the death of the Marquis and gave Severine, who had revived, into the hands of his agents.

After writing out a long statement of the facts as they were reported to him by the actors in the drama, he searched the corpse.

TheMarquis was the bearer of a letter, which he had received the evening before, and which was sufficient to establish his identity. It came from a dangerous criminal, named Renard, who, having taken it into his head to visit the Exposition of Paintings one Sunday, had recognized, in the portrait signed Cadornac, his friend Dahun, an old companion, who, like himself, had escaped from Noumea.

All the accounts and private papers which were found in the governess' secretary were seized and among them was the letter signed "M. de C.," which had been instrumental in clearing up the mystery of Rose Villa.

Severe Dahun was subjected to a preliminary

examination, but she only gave incoherent responses.

As the commissaire was about to take her away, she asked permission to go into her room to get her cloak. The magistrate consented, hoping to surprise her in the act of trying to abstract some compromising papers. With a rapid movement Severe seized a bottle from the cupboard where she was searching, opened it, and put it to her mouth.

The officers threw themselves upon her. They were too late.

"I have not two minutes to live," she said to them, "but I have escaped the scaffold, and that is all I want. It is I who killed Jeanne Caristie. It is I who have just tried to poison the Baroness de Noyal."

"I pardon you," murmured the Baroness, frozen with terror by this frightful scene.

Her brother, the Marquis, had already died in horrible convulsions.

They were neither judged nor condemned. What good would it have done? The Baroness did not even reclaim what they had stolen from her.

The examination was made without any noise, but it was a serious one; more serious than certain verdicts returned by twelve jurors.

It was public opinion, that is the entire press, which proclaimed the innocence of Angelique, and this absolution was worth a great deal more than a decree of acquittal.

Instead of going to Venice to be married under the vaults of Saint Mark, she married at the Madeleine, in presence of all Paris, Robert, who regrets nothing and is the happiest of men.

THE END.

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